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Volume 36 Issue 4 Summer 2016



PRAYING OUR EXPERIENCE

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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Human Development Magazine is a quarterly publication for people involved in the work of fostering the growth of others. This includes persons involved in religious leadership and formation, spiritual direction, pastoral care, education and those interested in the development of the whole person.

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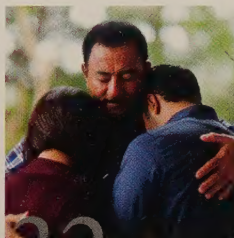
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Summer 2016

My brothers and sisters,

I am delighted to share with you our summer 2016 issue dedicated to the theme “praying our experience.”

St. Paul offers us the timeless challenge to “pray constantly” (1 Thess. 5:17). Most of his epistles begin with an extended prayer for the community or individual being addressed; likewise the letters end with prayers of benediction. Throughout his correspondence, St. Paul reminds his fellow believers to make their requests known to God with thanksgiving; all speech or action is to be done in the name of the Lord. Yet, how can we pray without ceasing? Even St. Paul acknowledges that we do not know how to pray as we ought (Romans 8: 26).

Most of us struggle to pray - to find the time, to stay focused and let it flow from the core of our being. We know that prayer and life cannot be discrete things and yet we too easily catch ourselves “saying our prayers” (and rushing back to tasks) instead of praying through our life experiences of joy or sorrow, hope or fear, anger, jealousy, lust or gratitude.

As Henri Nouwen wrote decades ago, “To pray unceasingly is to lead all our thoughts out of their fearful isolation into a fearless conversation with God.” (America, August 5, 1978). Prayer needs to begin with the concrete reality of our lives - but it cannot end there! Prayer looks inward only to look outward with greater gratitude, openness and compassion.

Herein rests the challenge all our authors address: how can we pray our experiences - personal, communal and even global- in such a way that we enter more fully into the mind and heart of Christ? How can formal prayers, the psalms of the Liturgy of the Hours, the prayers of the liturgy, truly resonate with our daily experiences? How can we transform problematic thoughts and desires into a purified expression of love that incorporates body and spirit?

Fr. Jerome Kodell, a retired Benedictine Abbott - no stranger to the psalms as a scholar and one praying them daily in community - reflects on the psalms as an example of how we can “pray our experiences.” Sr. Melanie Svoboda, SND, has written a very energizing piece entitled “Everyday Epiphanies;” she invites us to slow down and let prayer flow through us naturally and spontaneously. In a short piece, a Catholic lawyer, Dan Malone, offers his insights on the importance of how we articulate the very words of our most common prayer, the Lord’s Prayer.

A special treat in this quarter’s issue comes to us from England: Fr. Daniel O’Leary, a regular contributor to the Tablet, offers a pastoral perspective from his own experience of “Praying with a Troubled World.” It has often been said that we should pray with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Fr. O’Leary does just that as he models prayerful contemplation and intercession on behalf of the many people suffering around the world. He shows us how - by contemplation - we can get

“inside” the painful experience of others; we are no longer outsiders glancing with pity but we truly come into communion with them. He suggests that we can even have an appreciation of Earth and all elements of creation as they also “groan in agony” and come to a new spiritual birth. A very poetic, powerful and challenging essay!

Dr. Gillian Ahlgren of Xavier University shares with us valuable insights into the timeless message of St. Teresa of Avila regarding the way contemplative prayer becomes a way of graced living, a space for the Incarnation to continue to unfold within us and among us. If you enjoy her thoughts, you may want to pick up her newly published work, *Enkindling Love: the Legacy of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross*.

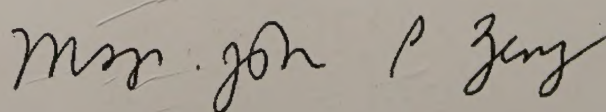
The ever delightful Fr. James Martin, SJ of America magazine gave me an interview during which we discussed various applications of our theme, “Praying our experience.” You will appreciate his usual humble, open style of reflecting on life experience; he is a great model for us all. Finally as an addendum, I composed some models of how we might pray through various experiences and come to contemplative adoration, gratitude and peace.

As a concrete example of how facing one’s challenges can become true prayer, we have a powerful first person narrative from Jeff Jay, a therapist who himself worked through addiction via prayer. It is truly a moving story, the capstone of this season’s issue!

As a special treat - also in keeping with our theme - on our back page you will find a marvelous example of “praying our experience” from the great spiritual author of yesteryear, Fr. Michel Quoist. Many of us developed our spirituality by building on his poetic reflections. The front cover is not explicitly or necessarily a scene of prayer but it seems to present a prayer of jubilation and thanksgiving, praise and wonder as mother and daughter simply enjoy life - and that is certainly prayer!

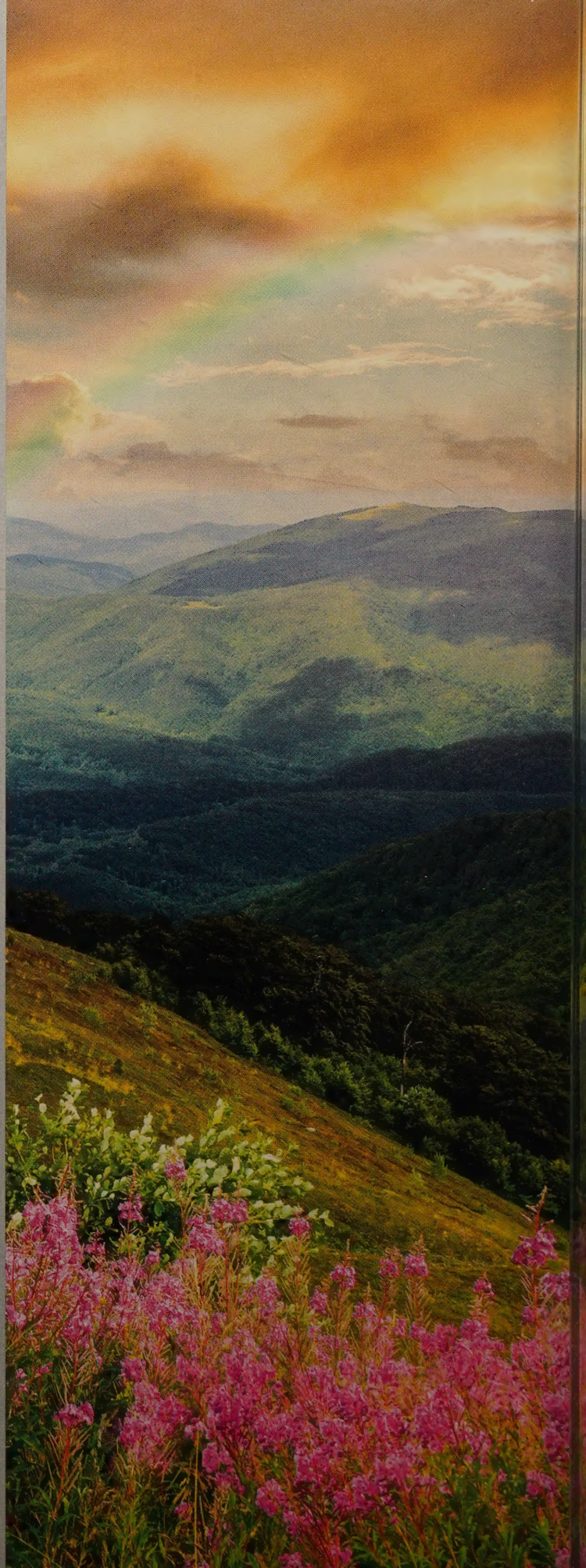
Happy reading, reflecting and praying!

Your brother in the Lord,



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“The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving make your requests known to God.”
(Philippians 4:6)



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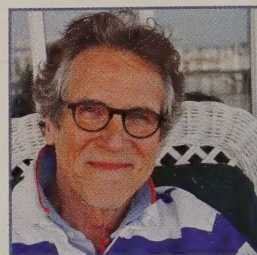
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Immaculata Retreat House
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October 5-7, 2016

Walking With the Wounded
Guest House Scripps Mansion
Lake Orion, MI

November 2, 2016

All Souls Mass and Luncheon
Guest House Scripps Mansion
Lake Orion, MI

December 8, 2016

Advent Vespers
Guest House Scripps Mansion
Lake Orion, MI

January 9-12, 2017

Alumni Winter Seminar
DiamondHead Beach Resort
Fort Myers Beach, FL

January 19-22, 2017

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DiamondHead Beach Resort
Fort Myers Beach, FL

April 24-27, 2017

Alumni Men's Retreat
Guest House Scripps Mansion
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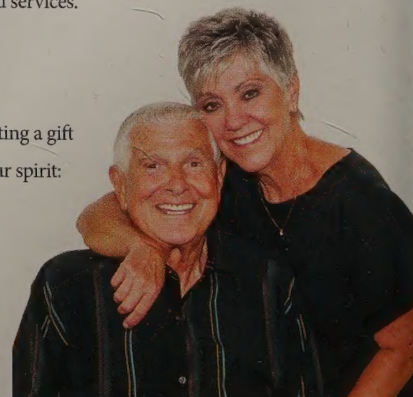
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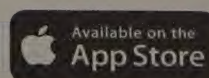
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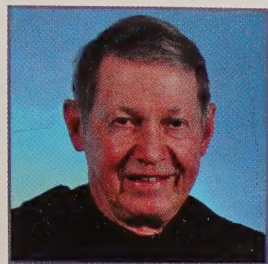
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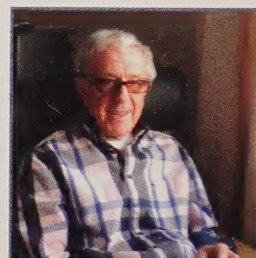
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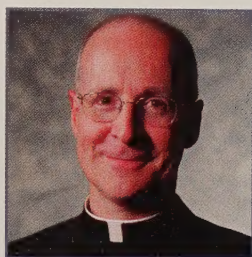
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INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS

The editors of Human Development are quite eager to publish articles that translate the latest research in psychology, health, medicine, and spirituality to ministry, formation and practice. Our hope is that Human Development will be known as the most user-friendly ministry publication. This will require making complicated theoretical knowledge, research, and concepts understandable and applicable to the personal and professional lives of our readers.

Since ministry is in a time of significant transition and change, we anticipate that the articles we publish will enlighten and positively influence the daily decisions and practices of those in Church leadership, ministry formation, spiritual direction, and counseling of any kind. There are also a number of previously under-appreciated forces that uniquely influence ministry and ministers: cultural, organizational, and situational factors. We intend to highlight and honor these factors in the pages of Human Development. Accordingly, we ask prospective authors to be mindful of these considerations in their manuscripts. Manuscripts are received with the understanding

that they have not been previously published and are not currently under consideration elsewhere. Feature articles should be limited to 4,500 words (15 double-spaced pages), with no more than six recommended citations and or readings; filler items of between 500 and 1,000 words will be considered. All accepted material is subject to editing. When quoting sacred scripture, the New Revised Standard Version is preferred. All manuscripts are to be prepared according to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th edition).

Letters are welcome and will be published as space permits and at the discretion of the editors. Such communications should not exceed 600 words and are subject to editing.

Authors are responsible for the completeness and accuracy of proper names in both text and Bibliography/suggested readings. Acknowledgments must be given when substantial material is quoted from other publications. Provide author name(s), title of article, title of journal or book, volume number, page(s), month and year, and publisher's permission to use material.

Manuscripts should be submitted to Msgr. John Zenz at editor@hdmag.org as an email attachment.



PRAYING THE PSALMS

Fr. Jerome Kodell, O.S.B.



INTRODUCTION: THE PSALMS – OUR WORDS, GOD’S WORD

The psalms are a “school” of prayer. These 150 prayers are songs of praise and thanks, sorrow, lament and petition. The psalms put us in touch with almost every human emotion. We can easily resonate with David in his sense of shame or sorrow or rejoice with gladness at the beauty of creation or the wonder of being miraculously saved. Different though they be in tone, ultimately all the psalms share in a common and deep confidence that God is listening to us as individuals and as a community.

In some ways the psalms are both our words to God and God’s Word back to us. The psalms blend together the human struggle to express our needs and hopes and the response of divine inspiration, imagination, mercy and promise. Praying the psalms actually shapes our prayer and moves us beyond ourselves to a deeper communion with the Lord and a more humble awareness of how we fit within His vast cosmos.

Photo courtesy:
The monks of Conception Abbey
chanting the Divine Office

When we pray the psalms, our voices blend together with the Body of Christ, singing the praises of the Heavenly Father in every time and place. The psalms open us up to the wonder and mystery of God's eternal love. Even more, we can sing and pray them with the reassurance that Christ Himself speaks ever anew in us through these same words. Christ is helping us individually and collectively "pray our experience."

MEETING GOD IN THE PSALMS

The primary exposure to the Book of Psalms for many Catholics is through the Responsorial Psalm at Mass, and if there is a lingering impression, it is probably from the refrains: "The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I should want"; "God is my refuge in the day of distress"; "Sing with joy to God our help."

For those of us who pray daily the Liturgy of the Hours it is different. The psalm verses are regularly rolling through our minds. The danger for us is that given our deep familiarity with the psalms and the distractions of our lives, the verses may not touch us as profoundly as they should. In this issue of Human Development we are considering the theme of "Praying Our Experiences." There are probably no prayers which contain more human experience than the psalms; the psalmists poured themselves out to the Lord in every emotion. They did not think that any feeling was too raw or too insignificant to bring before God, and our tradition has confirmed that insight by making the psalms the official prayers of the Jewish and Christian communities.

But how to connect the experiences of the psalmists with our experiences and bring the healing of God into our own lives? In one way or another, people

have been able to do this for 2500 years. These were the prayers of the prophets, of the people of the exile, of Jesus and the apostles, of the early and later Christians down to today. They are not the typical prayers of any particular generation, but somehow they have staying power for all generations. What are some ways we can get more deeply into them?

PSALMS AS POETRY

There are many avenues into the psalms as prayer, but I want to concentrate on a single feature of the psalms that was long neglected: their nature as poetry. This seems obvious in their presentation in contemporary Bibles, but for generations the poetic quality of the psalms was seen as incidental to their character in the inspired Bible, and in older editions they were often printed as prose. Today their poetic nature is a fundamental principle in psalm study and use. The meaning of a poem includes an experience beyond the content of the words, and that feature affects how we read, pray and sing the psalms.

Like a traveler packing a suitcase too small for the stack of clothes, the poet wrestles with words, pushing and squeezing to trap an experience of life in a few lines of print. Each word contains its own history, and the poet must balance associations in electric tension so that contact may always produce sparks of recognition and a current of shared life experience. The success of a poem depends on capturing an experience of truth in a way that it may bring to life again that very experience as the words are read by someone else later on.

Hebrew poetry is not the same as English poetry, and some features are always lost in translating from one language to another (such as alliteration or onomatopoeia), but there are elements common

"The psalmist did not think any feeling was too raw...
to bring before God"

to all poetry and some elements of Hebrew poetry come through the veil of the English language very well.

The psalms are strong in imagery, a feature present in most poetry but not always so pronounced. Most poetry shows rather than defines, and this is certainly true in many of the psalms. Good poetry has the ability to produce awareness of a deeper reality or an understanding of life's deeper meaning by a striking use of the familiar. Poets know there are some realities which cannot be seen head-on, and they use life experiences like a mirror to pick up stray glints of light and flash them through the corners of our eyes. Jesus' use of parables was in this tradition.

DESCRIBING OUR MYSTERIOUS GOD

We can describe God in prosaic terms as almighty, all-knowing, infinite, protecting us and providing for us. How much more compelling to say with the psalmist, "The Lord is my shepherd." Longing for God can be described in theological terms as "desire for transcendence." In the psalms this feeling has flesh and blood: it is a thirsty deer, an owl among the ruins, a lonely sparrow on a housetop, a parched land desperate for water.

When troubles haunt us, we feel like a sagging wall or a broken down fence, a worn-out tool, a worm, a bird that must flee to the mountains. We are surrounded by people who have deceiving lips and a double heart. Our only friend is darkness.

But God, our deliverer, is robed in light as in a cloak and the winds are his messengers. For him the night shines like the day. The mountains melt like wax when he comes to judge. He turns to me and hears my cry.

A distinctive characteristic of Hebrew poetry is the technique of parallelism, and this is one of the elements that come through in other languages. One line echoes another in a rhythm of regular beats either to repeat with different words or add to an

idea, for example,

"The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, his tongue speaks what is right." (Ps. 37:30)

"And now, kings, give heed, take warning, judges on earth." (Ps 2:10)

"Even if my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me in." (Ps. 27:10)

Or a point may be made by contrasting lines:

"The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he destroys." (Ps. 145:20)

Sometimes a progression of thought may spread to three lines:

"One conceives iniquity, is pregnant with mischief, and gives birth to deception." (Ps. 7:15)

The psalms as poetry invite us not just to a progression of ideas but to an experience: being carried on the waves of rolling parallels as the drama of life unfolds from image to image and thought to thought.

ENJOYING WHAT WE CANNOT EXPLAIN

One reason the psalms may strike us as obscure and appealing at the same time is our educational history. Classroom education tends to be linear and intellectual. We are trained to look for ideas and arguments. Even exposure to poetry in literature courses often does not open us to experiencing poems but rather to analyzing them for their intellectual content. But we remain fascinated by the poetic and remember times when we have been swept into a poetic experience.

An attention to the poetic nature of the psalms may enliven the way we use them in prayer. This dimension does not detract from any other approach but simply adds another option. In reading for information, the use of imagery and examples may

illuminate the meaning of a text. But they can also get in the way, and we may brush them aside to get to the meat.

In praying the psalms as poetry, instead of brushing aside the images it may help to focus on them, especially the metaphors and similes which portray human feelings and experiences. If we have not been doing this, we may be surprised to notice how many pictures have been flying past us, graphic images we didn't notice before: in a prayer that enemies may "dissolve like a snail that oozes away" (Ps 58:9); in a feeling that "affliction is wearing down my eyes" (31:10); in a promise to "keep a muzzle on my mouth" (39:2). These images are not distractions but the heart of the psalms as poetry. They are conveying the feelings of human beings like ourselves from centuries ago, and we recognize the feelings as very contemporary, though the psalmist may not use terms like anxiety or angst but speak of his heart "melting away within me" (22:15), and describe his emptiness as eating ashes (102:9).

The psalms sometimes go beyond simile and metaphor to personify inanimate creation:

"Let the rivers clap their hands, the mountains shout with them for joy." (98:8)

The Hebrew mentality is more at home than the Greek or Latin with this kind of embodiment or personification, which reaches even to what we consider abstract concepts:

"Justice will march before him, and make a way for his footsteps." (85:14)

Justice is here like a sentinel carrying a banner or blowing a trumpet to announce the coming of the Lord.

CELEBRATING GOD'S FIDELITY

A particular combination of virtues, sometimes personified, is of special importance. These are the "covenant virtues" of *hesed* and *emeth/emunah*,

which are commonly translated "love and truth" and are as close as the Bible comes to portraying what makes the God of revelation different from all other deities. But because these Hebrew words are very rich, *hesed* is rendered by various synonyms like "mercy," "kindness," "tenderness," and "compassion," while *emeth/emunah* may be "fidelity," "trustworthiness," "stability," or "faithfulness." Because of these disguises it is difficult to realize how often this combination appears in the psalms and prophets.

"Love and truth will meet; justice and peace will kiss." (85:11)

"Your mercy reaches to heaven, Your fidelity to the clouds." (36:6)

"He has remembered his mercy and faithfulness toward the house of Israel." (98:3)

"A throne shall be set up in mercy, and on it (a judge) shall sit in fidelity. (Is 16:5)

This combination identifies the God of Israel as "loving fidelity" or "faithful love." No other god was ever either loving or faithful towards his worshippers. This also establishes the pattern for our imitation of God in our daily walk, living in loving fidelity and faithful love toward God and toward our brothers and sisters. The shortest psalm is simply an introduction plus one verse proclaiming our God in terms of the covenant virtues:

"His mercy for us is strong;

The faithfulness of the Lord is forever." (117:2)

What I have said about the psalms so far may imply that they are all of a single kind or type of poetry. But the psalms are identified in categories according to literary genre. The largest number of psalms fall into the categories of laments, songs of thanksgiving and hymns of praise, all of which express human emotion. The examples I have given so far are from these psalms.



PSALMS OF REMEMBRANCE

A small group of historical psalms recall the events of salvation in poetic recitations of the Israelite creed. Among these are especially Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135 and 136. They tend to be longer because of the nature of their content, but they are anything but dry historical accounts. The saving events of history are recalled to arouse fervor and renewed dedication, and imagery abounds here as well:

“He split the sea and led them across, making the waters stand like walls, He led them with a cloud by day, all night with the light of fire, He split rocks in the desert, gave water to drink, abundant as the deeps of the sea, He made streams flow from crags, caused rivers of water to flow down.” (Ps. 78:13-16)

Psalm 136 takes the form of a litany with a line-by-line refrain, using the response “For his mercy endures forever:”

“The Lord remembered us in our low estate, for his mercy endures forever; Freed us from our foes, for his mercy endures forever; And gives bread to all flesh; for his mercy endures forever; Praise the


God of heaven, for his mercy endures forever.” (Ps. 136:23-26)

We may be moved by the example of this psalm to write our own life litany and thus nudge into memory blessings we have forgotten or taken for granted, and pray our own experiences in imitation of the psalmists:

The Lord gave me life and faith, for his mercy endures forever; He has patched up many wounds in my life, for his mercy endures forever; He has sent me good friends and walks with me, for his mercy endures forever.

PSALMS OF WISDOM

The wisdom psalms, so called because of their affinity to literature in the wisdom tradition of the Ancient Near East, wrestle with problems of daily living and offer moral admonitions. Biblical books in this tradition include Wisdom, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Sirach. Psalm 37, for example, addresses the age-old question of the suffering of the good and the prosperity of the evil in a series of proverbs, each introduced by a successive letter of the 22-letter Hebrew alphabet.



“Aleph. Do not be provoked by evildoers; do not envy those who do wrong. Like grass they wither quickly; like green plants they wilt away.” (Ps. 37:1-2)

Psalms like this one do not satisfy the modern reader. They foreclose on the mystery of life and try to tidy things up with an unrealistic view of divine retribution. Here the conventional wisdom or personal fantasy overcomes the lessons of experience. The author of Job rebelled against such a solution, and though he did not solve the problem of innocent suffering, he approached the issue with an honesty that has made his book a classic.

The long Psalm 119, which is divided into sections for use in midday Offices in the Liturgy of the Hours, is much more palatable for prayer because it does not presume to solve the mystery of life but is a series of statements reiterating the faith of the psalmist and of invocations for God’s help in the daily journey. Like Psalm 37, it is arranged on the Hebrew alphabet, but has a feature of industry and artistry noticeable only in the original language: twenty-two groups of eight verses, each verse of a particular group introduced by the same letter of the alphabet.

Most of the psalms were used in personal prayer and community worship long before they were collected in the Book of Psalms. The current Book is really five books or collections of psalms brought together in

stages (Psalms 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, 107-150). Even in the early days editorial notes were added to enhance the use of some of the psalms in prayer by giving them a life context in connecting them with events in the life of King David. This technique appears mainly in the first two collections.

Psalm 3, a lament by someone feeling weighed down and persecuted, is entitled “A psalm of David, when he fled from his son Absalom;” Psalm 51, the famous “Miserere” psalm of repentance, is annotated “when Nathan the prophet came to him after he had gone in to Bathsheba;” Psalm 54, a prayer of confidence in God’s help, is annotated “when the Ziphites came and said to Saul, ‘David is hiding among us.’” Critics argue whether or not these titles are historically accurate; what the editorial notes illustrate is that the effort to provide help to enrich the usage of the psalms in prayer by connecting them to familiar life experiences goes back a very long way.

CONCLUSION

The psalms are poetry, intended to draw us into the author’s heart, mind and soul, to “feel” the poet’s experience of God and make it our own. Rather than becoming too analytical, it is helpful to let the words flow over us – like waves splashing, washing our feet at the seashore.

The psalms reassure us any emotion and every emotion are acceptable to God. They also comfort us because they remind us: we do not pray alone but rather with the people of God of every time and place. Ultimately all human experience is the same: the desire for love, the need to give, the experience of grief and shame, hope and joy. In every time and place, one voice is singing and that voice is Jesus Christ, the Word of God!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. The psalms present us many diverse emotions and experiences. It can be tempting to look for psalms that resonate with my particular mood or struggle: have I ever done that? It can also be a good challenge to pray with a psalm that does not necessarily connect with where I find myself at the present moment: have I done that as well?
2. Fr. Kodell reminds us to pray the psalms as poetry and not become overly concerned with understanding every reference; "experience" the psalm and do not analyze or interpret it. Have you tried to just let the words and images tumble and cascade over you?
3. The Church invites us to pray the psalms at Mass and in the Divine Office as a means of deepening our communion with Christ and the whole Body of Christ; through the psalms we can enter into the mind and heart of Christ who Himself prayed them. Perhaps you could take one of the psalms listed below, reading and praying them as Christ prayed them during His earthly life and as they form part of the heavenly liturgy at the Supper of the Lamb:
 - Psalm 40 (especially verses 7-11)
 - Psalm 63
 - Psalm 22
 - Psalm 2



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Father Jerome Kodell joined the Benedictine Monastery of Subiaco Abbey, Arkansas in 1957. Ordained a priest in 1965 he went on to obtain an S.T.L. from Collegio Sant'Anselmo and an S.S.L. from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. Besides teaching in Subiaco Academy, he has been involved in the Little Rock Scripture Study Program. For two years he also served at the Santa Familia Monastery in Belize. From 1989 through 2015 he was Abbot of Subiaco Abbey.

His writings include: *The Catholic Bible Study Handbook*, Servant Books, 1985/rev.2001. *The Eucharist in the New Testament*, Glazier, 1988. *Twelve Keys to Prayer*, Liturgical Press, 1999. *Don't Trust the Abbot*, Liturgical Press, 2009. *Life Lessons from the Monastery*, Word Among Us Press, 2010.

In this article the The New American Bible version of the psalms was used since transition to the revised Grail Psalter for the liturgy is still underway.



EVERYDAY EPIPHANIES: PRAYING WITH THE ORDINARY

Melanie Svoboda, SND

IT HAPPENS EVERY DAY.

You're driving to work in the morning and you're suddenly moved by the beauty of the rising sun, and find yourself whispering, "Thank you, God!" Or you're standing in a check-out line and, for no apparent reason, you suddenly feel a deep kinship with all of humanity. Or you're sitting in a rocking chair and the steady creak-creak-creak of the rocker heightens your awareness of the passage of time and the giftedness of your own existence.

Sometimes the ordinary events of daily life can engender rich prayer. They can provide insights into the mystery of life, bestow consolation, or awaken gratitude. They can raise important questions we need to ask or inspire us to reach out to someone in need. And sometimes these ordinary events can draw us into effortless communion with God. I like to call such experiences everyday epiphanies.

We are all familiar with the Great Epiphanies in Scripture: Abraham gazing up at the stars, Moses standing sandal-less before the burning bush, Elijah cowering at the entrance of the cave, and Mary engaging in dialogue with the angel Gabriel. And we too have probably had our own Major Epiphanies in life: the experience of falling in love, the call to a particular vocation, the birth of a baby, a significant achievement or milestone, a long-lasting friendship, a once-in-a-lifetime journey. But encounters with God are not restricted to extraordinary times, places, or events. In fact, our so-called encounters with Divinity can often occur amid the ordinary happenings of everyday life.

It was St. Ignatius himself who said we must find God in all things. All things. Not merely the special. His description of prayer flows from this emphasis on the ordinary. He wrote, "Everything that turns one in the direction of God is prayer." Every thing. Ignatius also promoted the particular examen where we rummage through the events of our day searching for traces of the Divine. This practice too underscores the belief that we are to seek and find God in the quotidian.

The theologian Karl Rahner, SJ, wrote extensively about something he called "everyday mysticism." This mysticism was not the dramatic kind associated with some of the saints, like visions, levitations, trances. Rather it was a more humble brand of mysticism available to all of us on a daily basis. In his book, *Encounters with Silence*, Rahner addresses God with these words: "I must seek you in all things. If every day is everyday, then every day is Your day, and every hour is the hour of your grace."

In this article I would like to explore these experiences of everyday epiphanies. I will do this by reflecting on these questions: Why are such experiences so important for our lives? What habits or practices can we cultivate to avail ourselves of such experiences? What are some of the everyday things that seem to evoke this type of communion with God? And lastly, I will offer two brief epiphanies of my own.

THE ROAR OF THE ORDINARY

First, why are everyday epiphanies so vital for our spiritual life? The essential answer is this: because most of our life consists of "ordinary stuff." It is only logical, then, that we seek and find God in the places and circumstances where we spend most of our time. But there's another reason why being attentive to the ordinary is so important: In doing so, we come to see that the ordinary can be quite extraordinary. I recall an incident in my own life that illustrates this truth.

I was sitting in a park one summer day relaxing and jotting in my journal. In front of me lay a wide expanse of green grass. A young man happened by carrying his son who was about a year and a half. When the little boy saw the wide expanse of lawn, he could scarcely contain his excitement. He began wiggling in his father's arms trying to get down. His father put him down on the grass and immediately the little boy sat down and began rubbing his chubby little hands back and forth over the grass, giggling as he did. Then he began pulling at the grass, handing his father the few blades he managed to yank out. Then he jumped up and started toddling all over the lawn, never straying far from his father.

As I watched them, I was struck by the little boy's fascination with grass—with ordinary grass. But I was even more struck by the father. For he too had sat down and had begun to run his hand back and forth over the grass. Then he too pulled out a few blades and began to examine them more closely, even smelling them. As I watched him gazing in wonder—at the expanse of green, I thought: "It's as if this young father is experiencing grass for the first time—along with his son. And he is suddenly realizing what an extraordinary thing ordinary grass really is." (I confess that after they both left, I slipped off my sandals and walked barefoot for a few minutes, luxuriating in the feel of the beautiful, ordinary grass.)

In the novel *Middlemarch*, George Eliot writes, "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence." Yes, sometimes the ordinary does indeed roar. But we have to be receptive to that roar.

RECEPTIVITY FOR THE DIVINE

This brings us to the second question. What attitudes or habits can we cultivate to help avail ourselves for everyday epiphanies? First, as we know, we cannot

force an encounter with the Divine. God's Spirit blows freely where it wills. At the same time, though, we must also remember that God seeks us first. And God seeks us even more than we seek God. Jesus gave us three unforgettable images of God-as-Seeker: the homemaker and the lost coin, the shepherd and the lost sheep, and the father and the lost son. In all three parables, God is portrayed as persistent, thorough, and successful in the quest. So how can we make ourselves more open to this Seeking God? Although there are many ways, I've chosen three: by cultivating silence, by slowing down, and by focusing our attentiveness.

SILENCE

It is no exaggeration to say that the modern world is a noisy place. Every day we are bombarded with noise from clock radios, cellphones, computers, TV's, traffic, rumbling subways, and loud construction machinery. In addition, we have music in our cars, elevators, restaurants, stores—not to mention on our ipods. In short, trying to find some quiet time every day can be a challenge. Yet it is essential. For, as Blessed Mother Teresa of Kolkata said, "The first requirement of prayer is silence." Why? Because silence creates a sacred space where prayer can happen. Learning to create external silence takes practice and discipline. And learning to create internal silence can be even more daunting. We must silence not only our cellphones but also our mind's inner chatter, our fretting, our worrying, and the persistent call of our to-do list. Instead we must become comfortable with doing nothing before our God. I like what Joan Chittister, OSB, said about silence and prayer. "Silence is the place just before the voice of God."

SLOWING DOWN

The second habit we need to cultivate is slowing down. Mahatma Gandhi said, "There is more to life than increasing its speed." He said that in the 1940s. I wonder what he would think of our world today—

with its instantaneous communication, its rushing traffic, its soaring jet planes and speedy bullet trains. Only a society that reveres speed would promote multi-tasking, fast food, high speed internet, instant pudding, and even (believe it or not) one-minute bedtime stories.

In his book, *In Praise of Slowness*, Carl Honore gives the major reason why it is important to slow down regularly: "Inevitably a life of hurry can become superficial. When we rush, we skim the surface, and fail to make real connections with the world and other people." I would add, "and we fail to make real connections with God."

ATTENTIVENESS

A third habit that promotes receptivity to the Divine in daily life is attentiveness. Here's a story that illustrates the reward of attentiveness. Sister Mary Seton Schlather, SND, is an English teacher, musician and photographer. One day she was driving out to our provincial center in Chardon, a semi-rural area east of Cleveland. She had put her camera on the passenger seat thinking, "Maybe I'll see some deer today and get a few pictures." As she rounded the bend in the road, sure enough, there was a doe grazing by the side of the road. Sister carefully pulled her car off the road, picked up her camera, and slowly got out of the car.

As she did, she heard the doe snort a couple of times and thought, "Of no, she's going to run away." But instead, to Sister's surprise, two little fawns emerged from the tall grass and began to nurse. Sister got an extraordinary and rare picture of the doe nursing her fawns. But it was Sister's slowing down and her attentiveness that made the picture possible.

A good question to ask ourselves on a regular basis is this: what or who gets our attention? The things and people we pay attention to tell a lot about who we are. And if we are serious about our prayer, then won't we gladly lavish our attention directly on the

God who meets us in our everyday? Bishop Robert Morneau of Green Bay reminds us that there are 144 ten-minute segments in every day. He then asks, "Are we willing to give God at least one or two of them each day?"

PRAYING WITH EVERYDAY THINGS

Through my own experience of prayer as well as my conversations with other pray-ers, I have learned there are certain components of the everyday that seem to be natural conductors of the Divine. I will list ten of these components and say a few words about each one.

Water. Most retreat centers have some source of water on their premises or nearby—an ocean, a lake, a pond, a river, a tiny brook, a swimming pool, or even a gurgling fountain. Retreat centers seem to know that water has an inherent power to draw us to God. Even Jesus must have experienced this, for the Gospels tell us he frequented the Sea of Galilee. Water not only can inspire and mesmerize, it can also cleanse and refresh—especially if we wade or swim in it. Even the few minutes we spend in the shower each day or leisurely soak in a warm tub on occasion can be mini-epiphanies.

Gardening. The writer May Sarton said, "Gardening is an instrument of grace." My gardening friends attest to these words. Many of them also subscribe to the old adage: "I garden; therefore I am." In a garden we experience the paschal rhythm of birth-death-rebirth. We till the soil, plant seeds, spot the first green shoots, nurture their growth, weed, reap the harvest, and gather the seeds for next year's garden. Gardening often entails a series of losses: the frost kills the blossoms, the beetles attack the roses, the deer eat the corn. Gardening also provides triumphs: the tomatoes are juicy, the lilac tree is crammed with pink blossoms, the pumpkins are especially big. The losses and triumphs in the garden mirror the losses and triumphs in life itself. But such illuminations aren't restricted just for those who



actually do gardening. Even a mere stroll through a garden can be an experience of grace.

Children. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me." We would do well to follow his example and let the little children come to us. When we are holding a newborn, playing tag with a toddler, reading a story to a 4-year-old, conversing with a 9-year-old, or playing catch with a teenager, we are reminded that the greatest in the Kingdom of God is indeed a child.

Cooking or baking. Cooking and baking have a natural way of slowing us down. (We can't rush the rising dough.) It demands our complete attention.



(Did the recipe say baking soda or baking powder?) Every meal cooked, every cookie baked can be accompanied by prayerful meditation—especially when we focus on the individuals for whom we are cooking. Remember, Jesus' primary image of the Reign of God came from the world of baking: It is like yeast that permeates the entire dough.

Animals. St. Francis of Assisi is famous for his love of animals. In fact he dubbed them "our brothers and sisters." (Legend has it he even blessed St. Clare's little cat!) Animals have a way of revealing aspects of divinity to us, whether the animal is a faithful pet at our side, a chipmunk scurrying across the

back porch, a firefly blinking in the night, finches nibbling at a birdfeeder, a colony of meerkats foraging for food on TV, or a whale majestically breaking the surface of the ocean. John Cardinal Newman, preeminent scholar and theologian, must have appreciated the luminous quality inherent in animals. He regularly took the subway into London to visit the zoo.

Eating. A Jewish proverb says that, on the Day of Judgment, the first question God will ask us is this: "How did you like my strawberries?" This proverb raises another question: Do we take time to really enjoy the wide variety of foods we eat? As we know, eating serves three basic purposes: it provides nutrition, it gives pleasure, and it draws us together in community. But far too many of us eat alone and on the run. Sadly, for some, meals have become just one more chore crammed into an already overcrowded schedule. But when we take time to really savor our food, we might end up conversing with the Source of such bounty. It is amazing how easy it is to get hopelessly lost in a strawberry, an apple, a bowl of cereal, or a piece of bread.

Our address book. I was leafing through my address book one day searching for a certain name and address. After finding it, I decided to take a few minutes and pray with my address book. I prayed for those individuals I had known for decades. And I mourned for those who had died but whose name and address were still in my book. I also reflected on that word "address" with questions such as these: What is my real address? Is God in my address book? Do I regularly let God know where I am?

Washing Things. There's something therapeutic about washing something, whether dishes, clothes, or a car. Hands submerged in warm, sudsy water can be a sensual experience. I'm reminded of the Zen teaching: "When you wash the pot don't think about God. Think about washing the pot." As for washing clothes, most of us probably have washing machines and maybe even dryers. But no one has invented

a machine yet that folds our clothes. Folding clean clothes has the potential for engendering not only patience (especially with those fitted sheets) but also immense gratitude.

Strolling. Notice, I didn't say walking. Walking is fine, but strolling is slower and less-purposeful. When I walk I'm usually going somewhere. I have a destination—even if it is only to go around the block. But when I stroll I'm less interested in the destination and more interested in the journey, that is, the sights, sounds, and smells along the way. Strolling is meditative walking.

Standing in line. Some people view standing in line as a waste of time. But in a recent article in *The New York Times*, Matthew Malady calls the experience one of humanity's "most noble collective achievements." Why? Because standing in line is fair and democratic. It also reinforces our awareness that we are all in the same boat, an awareness desperately needed in a culture that glorifies individualism.

TWO EVERYDAY EPIPHANIES

I would like to conclude with two everyday epiphanies from my own life. The first occurred when a former student visited me with her two small children. The second happened when I was using the drive-thru at the bank.

Little Hannah is four years old. Her brother, Aaron, is two. I notice that Aaron's shoe is untied. "Come here, Aaron, and let me tie your shoe," I say. He comes and I bend down and tie the shoe while Hannah watches us closely. A few minutes later Hannah comes to me

with her pink sandal strap undone. "Do my shoe," she says, sticking her little foot out in front of me. "Please?" she adds. I bend down and buckle the strap. But I have to smile, for I know Hannah herself undid the strap so I would give her the same attention I had given her brother.

We are all little Hannahs. We are all craving attention—from one another and (more importantly) from God. If only we would realize, when it comes to getting God's attention, the attention is already given! And so I pray: Attentive One, I set before you all that is "unbuckled" in my life. Help me—please?

USING THE DRIVE-THRU AT THE BANK

I was cashing a check at the drive-thru at the bank. I had my car radio on the local classical station. As I finished the transaction and began to pull out of the bank, I heard the familiar strains of Franz von Suppe's "Poet and Peasant." Suddenly, my eyes welled up with tears. At first, I didn't know what was happening to me. But as I pulled out onto the street I realized exactly what was happening. My father had just died a few months before. "Poet and Peasant" was one of his favorite classical pieces. He played it over and over on his hi-fi when I was growing up.

Just hearing the opening strains of that beautiful piece of music caused the tears to rise up—even before I was aware of what was happening. I was grieving my father, the man who gave me life and nurtured me in countless ways. As I drove home from the bank that day I found myself thanking my father aloud for his love for me. I thanked him too

“...I have to smile, for I know Hannah...
undid the strap so I would give her the same
attention I had given her brother.”





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melannie Syoboda, a Sister of Notre Dame in Chardon, OH, has ministered in education, congregational leadership, retreat work, and formation, including six years in the Jesuit novitiate in Detroit. A prolific writer, her books include *Everyday Epiphanies* and *When the Blue Heron Flies*. Visit her blog *Sunflower Seeds: Celebrating Everyday Spirituality* at melanniesyobodasnd.org.

for his love of classical music, a love he bequeathed to me. I also told him how much I missed him and I asked him to be with me on my earthly journey. Then I found myself thanking God not only for my father, but also for my tears.

CONCLUSION

As children in catechism class, we were probably asked the question: Where is God? And we learned to answer dutifully: God is everywhere. As adults, we can appreciate the deep mystery and profound comfort of those words. God is every where. Or “There is no where where God is not.” And there is no event so ordinary that God cannot speak through it. Frederick Buechner wrote, “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. Touch, taste, see, hear, and smell your way to the holy.” For all of life is grace. And all moments can be everyday epiphanies.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Have you ever experienced an everyday epiphany? If so, describe it.
2. Of the three habits or practices discussed (silence, slowing down, and attentiveness) which one(s) do you already cultivate? How might you nurture the one(s) you struggle with?
3. Of the ten examples under “Praying with Everyday Things,” are there any that you too have experienced as natural conductors of Divinity? What other everyday things would you add to the list?

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MINDFUL PRAYER: LITTLE THINGS MATTER

Daniel P. Malone

Prayer is communication with God. Current thought encourages extemporaneous communications - even just listening - and that is good. But formal prayer also remains a critical part of worship, especially in times of trouble. Here's the problem: even beautiful prayers take effort and in our distracted, rapidly paced lives we often forget what we are actually saying. As a result, prayer often becomes routine, especially when recited aloud by a congregation whose participants' attention spans are being challenged by countless distractions. This is even more the case when the congregation misplaces intended emphasis on critical words or phrases. Doing so can unintentionally numb the impact of otherwise mindful moments. For that reason, I humbly offer a suggestion. It may sound small. But little things matter.

Proper emphasis of key words in prayers is as crucial to mindful prayer as ingredients are to most food dishes. Otherwise, prayer can become akin to eating terribly bland food. And yet, misplaced emphasis by congregations abounds! For example, in light of its clear purpose, our response to "The Lord be with you" should be "and with YOUR spirit." After all, we are reciprocating personal wishes. Likewise, early during the mass, each

of us confesses our shortcomings. After the Lord's Prayer, at the Lamb of God and in response to the priest's invitation that we come to communion, we again profess our unworthiness. For that reason, we should say, "I have greatly SINNED" and "Lord, I am NOT worthy ..." Think about those moments. Like prodigal children, each of us twice publicly admits unworthiness. Despite our imperfections, out of His love, God responds to our sincere prayer by deepened experience of communion with Him and His Body the Church. It is, therefore, only fitting that we also emphasize "GLORY to God" and "I BELIEVE." But we tend not to emphasize any of these key words. Failure to do so diminishes the profundity of so many moments during the mass.

Numerous other such examples exist. One, however, strikes me as particularly disappointing. It occurs virtually every time I participate in saying the Our Father as part of a congregation. No prayer in our religion is more important, more meaningful, and more beautiful than the Lord's Prayer. It captures our pact with God. Like the Gettysburg Address, it does so in a simple, straightforward way.

THY WILL BE DONE

The prayer begins, of course, by recognizing God's central role in our lives, i.e. "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be THY name." Next comes the critical phrase and commonly misplaced emphasis. "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done." At virtually all masses in which I have participated, the congregational emphasis has been on "will be" rather than on "Thy." It suggests that the word "will" is being used as a verb, i.e. "will be" rather than a noun (that is, God's plan or desire for us all). Placing the emphasis on "Thy" helps remind us that it is God's will, not ours, that should serve as our guiding light. Instead, through misplaced emphasis and mindless repetition, we unintentionally reduce the most powerful

phrase in one of our religion's most powerful prayers. While not wrong, it dilutes what can be a powerful reminder of our core belief.

Our world seems so unsettled - economically, politically, socially, and otherwise - and I am worried about mindfulness in prayer? In a word, yes. Indeed, it is precisely because of recent tragedies that I am. The Our Father is not just any prayer. It is a reminder that our relationship to God and "His will" should be paramount. What is His will? Stated simply, it departs radically from the Old Testament paradigm of "an eye for an eye" and instead promotes the two-fold directive to love God and love neighbor - all neighbors - as you love yourself. It petitions God to forgive us as we, in turn, strive to forgive others. What a tribute to reinforce that commitment by saying collectively with a firm, loud, and unified voice, "THY will be done." Other reasons exist, too. Let me share just three.

WORSHIP COMPETITION

First, in 2005, the esteemed, late author, David Foster Wallace, gave a simple, albeit profound, college commencement speech titled "This Is Water." In it, he opines that "life" before death mandates that everyone worship something. He recommends worship of God. He reasons that, "...pretty much anything else that you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough. . . Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. . . Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid . . . Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they are evil or sinful, it's that they are unconscious. They are default settings."

**"Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be THY name."**



Wallace believes that, like water for fish, “life” has “everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over, that ‘This is (our) water.’” (parenthetical added). Wallace is hardly a traditional Catholic authority. But as Pope Francis taught in his incredibly motivational encyclical, “Laudato Si,” and has consistently demonstrated by his actions, we are connected with everyone and everything. Accordingly, wisdom and inspiration can come from a plethora of sources, but only if we pause and embrace them. In that sense, God is our water. His will be done.

Second, a resounding emphasis on “Thy” reminds each of us, and when gathered all of us, what we believe. This matters because our Lord has also gifted each of us with the power of free will. That includes, as Wallace reminded, the right to choose what we worship. Free will, no matter where it leads, must also be part of God’s will.

We choose to come together weekly to worship our God. At the same time, to varying extents, most, if not all, of us also choose to worship things. Still others choose to worship only things. Fyodor Dostoevsky’s “Brothers Karamazov” brilliantly captures this worship competition. Reading his exquisite chapter on the Grand Inquisitor enables both the atheist (e.g. money, power, fame, sex, and/or brilliance) and the theist to exclaim, “Exactly!” Given the worship competition in today’s

world, emphasizing our conviction to God’s will each time we recite the Lord’s Prayer mindfully is not trivial.

PRAYER TAKES PRACTICE, CONCENTRATION AND FOCUS

Finally, like many, my childhood featured sports, sports, and more sports. Anyone who had a similar upbringing discovered that practice was critical. Those who pursued other interests - e.g. music, theater, painting - made a similar discovery. Unlike games, practices had no fans watching; and there was no “thrill of victory” against an opponent. So for some, perhaps most, practice meant simply “going through the motions.” Others gave every practice their best efforts and thereby improved from either not-so-good to better, or even good to great.

Ask any good coach: practice and commitment to perfecting the “little things” are necessary. That means doing things “as intended.” How many have quit sports or other pursuits before they even really understood how the game (or instrument) is intended to be played? Some never experienced the joy of having a good practice by giving it one’s all, or running a drill as if it is one’s last. There can be “joy” in making the most of each and every practice regardless of games and their outcomes.

Why shouldn’t these realities be the same with prayer, only more so? Mindful prayer takes concentration, effort, and proper emphasis. It can be so joyful! It also promotes



ness, compassion, and understanding. Treating
ers with those virtues brings us closer to Christ than
ually any other human undertaking. In today's world,
t is not insignificant.

closing, how about you? Clearly, everyone has the
ht to pray as they wish. All I suggest is that one pray
h intended emphasis before rejecting prayer as being
bland. At mass, listen with a more discriminate ear
en prayers are recited or when spoken aloud. Help to
lain their intended emphasis. Doing so requires one
hink about what she/he is doing. But doing so will
ely add spice. Then share your discoveries as I am
ing to do herein. It may seem small. But little things
tter. Ask any good coach, or priest.

However you choose to pray, peace be with you and all
man beings. **Thy** will be done!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Dan Malone emphasizes the importance
being “mindful” as we pray – that is, paying
reful attention to our words, especially when
ey are familiar phrases. Have you noticed
yourself scanning or speed reading your psalms
the Liturgy of the Hours or absent –mindedly
shing through liturgical prayers? How might
u challenge yourself (and those in your
ngregation) to slow the pace?

Dan also brings up an interesting term
orship competition.” We have a need to
orship and if we don't worship God, we will
oose something/someone else. Have you
er lost perspective and balance and let your
orship of the Lord slide to the side?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel P. Malone is married with three children. He has practiced law in Detroit for 38 years. Among other things, he has served as Board President for the University of Detroit Jesuit High School.

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PRAYING OUR TROUBLED WORLD

Daniel O'Leary



PRAYING WITH AND FOR THE COMMON FAMILY

You are away from your family. Your family is in trouble. You pray for the family. You hope the prayers will work. But you are still anxious. You decide to go back home. You arrive at home. You bring your full attention to the whole situation. You are there in person, with your total concern, your full involvement, your truest self. It is your home, where you began your life's journey. It is where you belong. From within the situation you try to bring about the change you could not achieve from the outside. Beyond all your advice from a foreign shore, all your prayers at a distant shrine, your real presence is the most powerful transforming influence of all. Inside the situation, your love is released at the heart of your family, and healing the home begins to unfold.

We could follow this same pattern as we pray for a deeply wounded humanity, a troubled world, a ravaged Earth. We are not outsiders looking on, sending transitory good wishes toward less fortunate foreigners in a weeping world. We are not unconnected to those who perish at barricaded borders, with those who are persecuted, tortured, shot for seeking safety in our western countries. They are our family. The mutilated Earth is our home, our mother. Our essence has been formed by the energies of the Earth. We are, in fact, the very consciousness of the world itself, reflecting its sublime wonder and its ruined beauty. Pope Francis echoes St. Francis when he reminds us of these precious truths in his Apostolic Exhortation and Encyclical, *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si'*.

We 'pray our troubled world' when we allow our understanding of it, and our relationship with it, to be transformed; when we identify with it, consciously embracing it as the source of our being. We are now present to people's pain and their cries, even to the 'groaning' of the Earth itself (Romans 8:22). In some mysterious manner we join God the Creator and Savior in healing the world when we see the world as we see ourselves and those we cherish; when we look with compassion upon it through God's eyes, recognizing the divine presence already and always incarnate within it. 'Praying our troubled world' entails our willingness to understand more profoundly the mystery of creation, Incarnation and how they connect.

A RENEWED SENSE OF CREATION AND SALVATION

The vision of God's on-going renewal of creation opens our hearts to being grasped by mystery. Thanks to prayer in this fashion, our understanding of the theology of creation or of "nature and grace" begins to change. Once we acknowledge our limited understanding of Adam, Eve and Original Sin, we begin to see all creation and evolution as a divine love-story whose beauty reflects the essence of the Creator. The Incarnation most powerfully reveals this amazing, saving grace. Just as the ever-present Word redeemed the world by taking flesh in the heart of it, so also do we when we see ourselves not just as passing travellers in exile on an alien soil, but as the beating heart of God's incarnate body, the Earth itself, and all its citizens who suffer unending torments.

THE URGENCY OF POPE FRANCIS

Too many of us say a few passing prayers for the wider, wounded world, contribute our loose change, blame someone or other for the situation, and feel smug about our efforts as dutiful citizens. Such shallow involvement may work wonders for personal ego-health but it does little for the eco-health of our natural home. We are called to be present to the troubles of the world in a real way. It is God's body; it is our mother, our sister, our brother. Its inhabitants are God's family, our family. Pope Francis writes urgently about a 'conversion' of our souls, a transformation of life-style, dedication of our energies to saving planet Earth and the poor who cling to it in desperation.

The Pope believes that the call to a prayerful concern for our troubled world, to a conversion of our lives to save our Mother-Earth, is much more than an added-on obligation. It is a knowing in the heart, a recognizing of our wider family of origin and destiny, an awakening of the divine imagination already within the human psyche. Our hearts, sacred from birth and Baptism, fashioned lovingly in the divine image, somehow sense this astonishing revelation of our intimacy with the Earth, and our responsibility for saving her life and the lives of those whose plight is increasingly desperate.

Our prayers are powerful when they grow from the way we see and understand the mystery of creation and incarnation. The Pope is trying to help us hold in our hearts the suffering poor as God's greatest concern. He wants us to live, love and serve with them uppermost in our

"Beyond a passing sympathy we now surrender to the deepest empathy, seeing our Earth and its broken-hearted family from the inside."



ALL CREATION IS MOVING TOWARD COMPLETION

Humanity, in its evolution, is moving inexorably toward its final Omega in God. Even on this weeping, warring planet we still believe in the divine dream. Incarnation establishes this belonging and evolving as the very purpose of our being. Deeply and essentially, we are the vital voice of the Earth, calling, yearning for completion. Only when we truly realize this, and live our lives with an eternal vigilance for the well-being of our Mother-Earth, will our prayers for her be salvific and transformative. Our pleas and wishes will come from the depths of our earthy hearts and bodies. These were already, and always, the living promise in the womb of the Earth. When we pray for a troubled world we are praying for our own future, for the survival of our children, of all humanity, and of all creation – for all we call the incarnate body of God.

hearts. Like the artist who looks at the block of marble and sees the hidden angel, like the farmer who looks at his winter fields and sees the waving harvest, like the mystic who looks at the caterpillar and sees the butterfly, like the mid-wife who looks at the pregnant woman and sees a beautiful wee baby, like Jesus who looked into the hearts of sinners and saw their grace, so too we are called to look at our beloved, broken and beautiful Earth and see the weeping face of God.

PRAYING WITHIN THE GROWING PAINS

Beyond a passing sympathy we now surrender to the deepest empathy, seeing our Earth and its broken-hearted family from the inside, experiencing it as we experience ourselves. Like Paul's insights from Romans, we see all this world's struggles as growing pains, stretching to new possibilities. We suddenly see our role of service as urgent and truly possible. 'Praying our troubled world' means that we do not stay on our knees: active contemplation reminds us that Resurrection has happened. And Resurrection is about more than a miraculous moment for the crucified body of Jesus; it is the final stage of creation and Incarnation for the crucified world.

The troubled world we pray for is not "out there" - anymore than God is. We, and the Holy Spirit who moves us to pray, and the world we pray for, are inextricably bound up together. All creation is moving toward fulfilment. It is a slow, vulnerable becoming, with terrible birth-pains. And the crucifixion continues. But so does Resurrection.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis speaks of a silent 'eastering' at work in the evolution of the planet – the same evolution that is transforming our own sense of participation and responsibility, in an unfolding future. 'The kingdom of God is already present in this world' he writes, 'and is growing here and there in different ways – like the small seed that grows into a great tree . . . the kingdom is here, it returns, it struggles to flourish anew. Resurrection is already secretly woven into the fabric of history.' Words such as these reveal to our hearts the depths of the mystery we are part of, and the urgency of our desire for its completion.

'Praying our troubled world' is now resounding from the heart of the universe. It is our own

voice, no longer chanting from a disconnected, elevated and remote plateau but passionately pleading, on fire at the core of life, joining in the lamentations of the Indwelling Trinity, bereft with the sorrowful Mother of Life we call God. Pope Francis sees the emergence of a timeless, universal resurrection gestating at the core of the Earth, like an eternal Spring. He believes in the Good Fridays of our existence, in the irrepressible birthing of Easter. He sees all evolution, all the slow growing of the world, in terms of incarnate redemption, in terms of the saving and blossoming of the Earth. 'Each day in our world,' he reminds us, 'beauty is born anew; it rises, transformed, through the storms of history . . . Where all seems to be dead, signs of resurrection suddenly spring up. It is an irresistible force.'

ANOTHER BEGINNING

All of this brings us to a new way of being, a new way of seeing, a new way of praying. In the Christian tradition this revelation has been called "the sacramental vision," the "Catholic imagination." It springs from an orthodox theology of nature and grace, from the mystical spirituality of humanity, from the astonishing implications of Incarnation. It reveals to us the nature of the ultimate intimacy of God with all created beings, the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in all that lives. In this truth and context we begin to realise, at the core of our being, the praise in bird-song, the adoration in each new dawn, the cry of the ocean, the lament of the Earth. It is then that our prayer is in deep communion with the wounded Earth; our anxious voices are in time and tune with the longing of life, with the desire of the Holy Spirit. The Irish poet Joseph Mary Plunkett wrote:

I see his blood upon the rose

And in the stars the glory of his eyes;

His body gleams amid eternal snows,

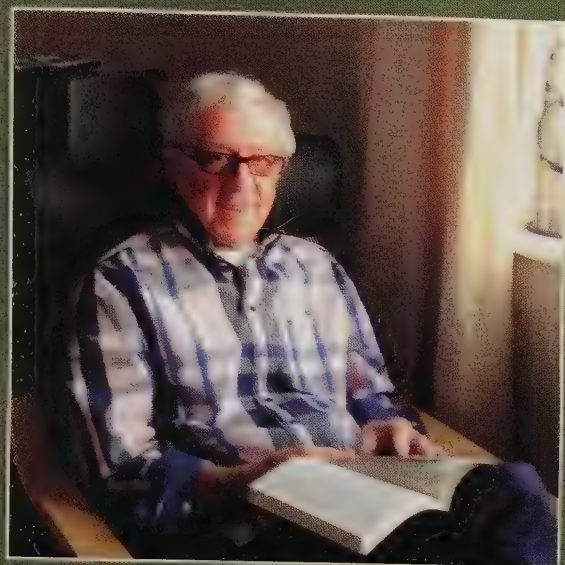
His tears fall from the skies.

Children, of course, unknowingly have that grace of seeing, being and belonging. They somehow sense their place in the world. And just as they heal us all, they heal the world too. Their very lives of wonder bless the Earth. In ways we cannot understand, they are the "fleshed prayers" of Incarnation, priestesses and prophetesses of life, small sacraments of divine presence to protect their suffering sisters and brothers, and Mother-Earth herself. The land silently reverberates with the perfect passion of their innocent prayer and presence. They know that an un-prayed for world will die. Physicist Brian Swimme wrote, "Say this to every child – you come from the energy that gave birth to the universe. Its story is your story; its beginning is your beginning."

When we 'pray the troubled world,' the troubled world is praying for itself. Why? Because we are its beating heart. We are its mind, soul and voice. And when the troubled world is praying for itself, it is God incarnate, also at the heart of her own lovely, ravaged body, that is praying and listening to its "groaning." Christians are challenged to hold together the mystery of creation, of evolution, of suffering, of incarnation, of Christianity, of Eucharist. This love-story captivates us with a different lilt, logic and language to the destructive, dualistic 'fall/redemption' doctrines that are still suffocating the Holy Spirit of freedom and intimacy.

At the dynamic, evolving centre of it all, is the love called God. This Love, pulsing in the dance of the Blessed Trinity, continues to beat out its pain, prayer and praise in the heart of the cosmos and in the cosmos of the heart. It is the wild energy of the Holy Spirit of the Risen Christ. It is the beginning, and the middle, and the end of God's love-affair with humanity, with every creature. It is that first sacred thrust of Being into the Alpha of space and time, finding its invincible, healing, loving way toward the Omega of God's all-embracing, all-welcoming, all-completing heart.

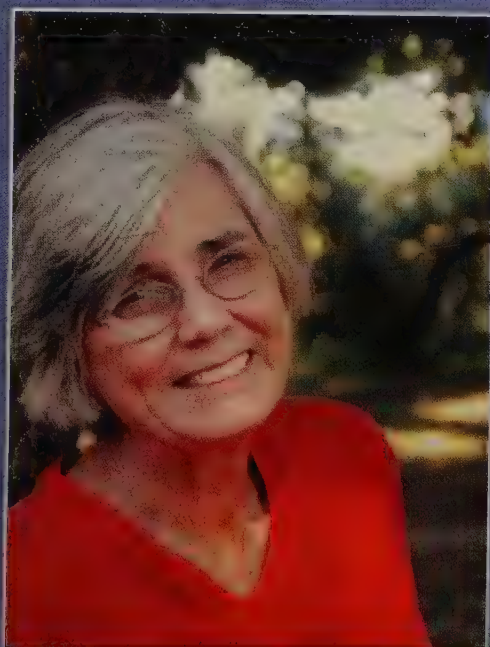




ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel O'Leary, MA (UK), MA (CA), a priest of the Diocese of Leeds, England, is a writer and speaker. He has worked as parish pastor and college lecturer for 50 years. Author of many books, his most recent being 'Treasured and Transformed' and 'The Happiness Habit' (both Columba Press, Dublin), he also writes for The Tablet and The Furrow. The main aim of all his work is to reveal the astonishing meaning of the Incarnation, and how it transforms the quality of our daily lives. He himself still struggles, each new day, to stay authentic and free!

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PRAYER AND LIFE: TEACHINGS FROM THE DOCTOR OF PRAYER

Gillian T. W. Ahlgren

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW: "RELATIONSHIPS UNFOLD IN PRAYER"

Prayer is a relationship seeking constant expansion. Prayer encompasses all of the ways that we explore and cultivate relationships - with God but also with self and others. The whole point of prayer is to enable our growth in love, a love expressed not only in words but in how we live, moment to moment.

Prayer sensitizes us to the presence of God. It gives us eyes to see our world differently. Prayer motivates us to support the movements of God, to recognize and attend to God in the world around us, and, most importantly, it enkindles love in us, a love that gives fortitude to make choices toward the deepening of God's life, in us and in our world. Prayer encompasses both the context in which relationship with God develops and the practices that habituate us to life-giving relationship.

As we become more accustomed to relationship with God and the practices that accompany that relationship, all of our human relationships gain a grounding that enables them (and us) to flourish. Because prayer is life-giving relationship, it is ultimately the key to growth, resilience, and full human flourishing.



We need not be an expert in prayer to know these basic truths in our own lives. Even our limited experiences of prayer teach us that, as we reach to God for help, consolation, guidance, company or simply to behold and adore, each expression of prayer is another facet of relational activity. What happens when we become more systematic and deliberate, both about individual experiences of prayer and about the relational growth to which it invites us?

TERESA OF AVILA, DOCTOR OF PRAYER

While many Christian mystics give us insight into the intricacies of relationship between God and the human person, Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) shows us how integral prayer is to growth as a human being. In fact, Teresa, named the Doctor of Prayer in 1970, provides perhaps the tradition's most integrated synthesis of the steps toward the unitive life, a space of vitality where empowering partnership with God bears fruit in the human community and creates possibilities that would not be possible for us to envision by ourselves. As the many international congresses celebrating her 500th birthday last year demonstrate, Teresa's insights into human personhood and life-giving love span time and space and provide refreshing wisdom across cultures and generations today.

Although Teresa is known as a teacher of contemplative prayer, her insights into both prayer and personhood are applicable to all. As

an educator and as a pastoral theologian, I often hear people say, "if only I could pray!" or "I don't have a prayerful temperament," or other, similar words, as if prayer were for special people—those dedicating themselves to religious life, for example, or those with the patience of saints. Nothing could be farther from the truth, and Teresa's own honesty about her struggles with prayers provides helpful, experiential counsel for all of us.

Teresa is sympathetic to the restlessness of the human mind, acknowledging that it "ordinarily flies about quickly,"¹ distracting us from greater absorption in God, and when we cannot concentrate in prayer or find it difficult, she advises us to go gently, reminding us that "you cannot begin to recollect yourselves by force but only by gentleness, if your recollection is going to be continual."² Teresa teaches that prayer is as natural to us as life itself; it is not meant to be stiff or formal but conversational, colloquial, intimate and heartfelt.

PRAYER AS CONVERSATION

Teresa's basic style of prayer could best be described as "dialogical." She herself tells us this, in her core, operational definition of prayer:

1 See her descriptions and counsel in Interior Castle IV:1:6-10 and IV:3:8.

2 Ibid., II:1:10.

Prayer is nothing more than intimate conversation with a friend. It means taking time frequently to be alone with the One whom we know loves us.³

Colloquy, as a prayer style, suggests forms of conversation with God and encapsulates more broadly the variety of ways we approach prayer with familiarity, humility, and openness to the possibility of dialogue. This “dialogue” need not be the hearing of particular words from God in the moment; here “dialogue” is suggestive of a relational disposition in the one who prays, with the possibility that some forms of communication with and from God may emerge as we become more attentive and spiritually sensitive to the presence of God and as we share more concretely our inner lives (hopes, dreams, concerns, fears, disappointments, etc.) with God.

Teresa’s initial writings on prayer, *The Book of Her Life* and *The Way of Perfection*, were written after at least ten years of practice in colloquy as a prayer form encouraged by the early Jesuits as they diffused Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* more broadly throughout Spain. The Jesuits had arrived in Avila in 1554, and they found in Teresa a dedicated student who advanced and refined Ignatius’s basic spiritual practices. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius defines prayer simply: “The colloquy is made, properly speaking, as one friend speaks to another, or as a servant to his master, now asking some grace, now communicating one’s affairs and asking advice in them.”⁴

This dialogical approach to prayer is a natural outgrowth of our openness to the possibility that

we might discover, in God, our truest friend. It was precisely the experience of God as friend and compassionate, trustworthy companion that Ignatius had wanted to invite through the *Exercises*, and Teresa shows us what the practice of colloquy, deepened exponentially over the course of a lifetime of prayer, can become.

RESPECTFUL FAMILIARITY WITH GOD

For Teresa prayer is the way that we grow in familiarity with God, particularly as we gain practice, trust, and deep affection for God. In colloquy the various things that we might share conversationally with a friend or confide to their prayers (and even those things we might not dare say to anyone) are safely confided in a conversational way to God. This familiarity with God, however, does not suggest that our prayer should be thoughtless, haphazard, or careless, as she writes at the beginning of the *Interior Castle*:

A prayer in which a person is not aware of whom she is speaking to, what she is asking, who it is who is asking and of whom, I do not call prayer, however much the lips may move... Anyone who has the habit of saying whatever comes into one’s head or whatever one has learned from saying at other times, in my opinion is not praying.⁵

In this basic admonition, intentionality, personal presence, and thorough investment in the moment of encounter with God become hallmarks of authentic prayer. Teresa’s counsel neatly deflects contemporary controversy between mental and vocal prayer, calling people, past and present, into the mystery of direct engagement with the divine whenever they turn to prayer. Teresa reminds us that prayer is

³ *The Book of Her Life*, 8:5.

⁴ *Spiritual Exercises*, par. 54.

⁵ *Interior Castle* I:1:7

“Prayer is nothing more
than intimate conversation with a friend.”



BRINGING OURSELVES – AS WE ARE – TO PRAYER

Teresa invites us to bring the whole of ourselves into prayer. We bring all of ourselves to prayer without letting prayer be all about us. In other words, we bring what most concerns us, what draws our attention, what spins around in our heads as we fret about it and yet we also approach prayer lightly, clearing plenty of inner space in order for God to enter into us. In fact, bringing the space of the self (and not just the preoccupations and worries and things that we carry) into prayer is critical, for the “things of the soul must always be considered plentiful, spacious, and large; it is difficult to exaggerate the abundance and generosity of the soul. It is capable of much more than we can imagine, and the light of God in this palace shines in all parts.”⁷ It is in the space of prayer that we begin to realize that we may be more, not just less, than what we think.

always a relational activity; therefore, we cannot approach it without growing self-possession and generous self-offering.

Teresa encourages a healthy awareness of God’s majesty that is not intended to keep us from approaching God deeply, intimately, and tenderly. We are able to come to God familiarly, humbly, just as we are, and to find and take consolation in the space of our relationship with God, no matter what life is handing us. Our relationship with God ultimately gives us a keen self-knowledge—one that encompasses awareness of our shortcomings even as it gives us a graced knowledge of our potential and a foundational desire to grow toward that potential.

For never, however exalted the soul may be, is anything more fitting than self-knowledge; nor could it be even were the soul to so desire.... [W]e shall never completely know ourselves if we don’t strive to know God. By gazing at God’s grandeur we get in touch with our own lowliness; by looking at God’s purity we shall see our own filth; by pondering God’s humility we shall see how far we are from being humble.⁶

Teresa also suggests that true prayer integrates the heart and the intellect; while we may not be capable of seeing and understanding the meaning or direction or best choice in the circumstances of our lives, Teresa does not speak of prayer in ways that connote blind faith. Instead, Teresa reveals a God who is constantly illuminating, constantly expanding both our heart’s capacity to love and our mind’s capacity to see and live toward what is truest and best.

Prayer broadens our capacity at levels that encompass and surpass our cognitive abilities; the all-encompassing reality of prayer breaks down, integrates, and reconfigures how we see, know, feel and understand. It is not easy to speak about such a complex and ineffable process. Repeatedly, Teresa counsels us that we should not undergo transformative prayer alone and that we should seek out those who are farther advanced for counsel, support and accompaniment.⁸

6 Ibid., I:2:8-9; cf. Spiritual Exercises, par. 59.

7 Interior Castle I:2:8.

8 See Ibid., II:1:10; III:2:12.



WHAT WE REALLY DESIRE

Beginners in the process of colloquial prayer may well wonder: What is the subject matter of one's colloquies with God? The answer is simple: Anything and everything that is worthy of our time with God. Sometimes there are pressing matters in our lives that, because of their importance to us, take up much of our colloquy. (But we should continually ask ourselves whether what we are bringing to God in colloquial prayer is the thing that will best advance and strengthen our relationship with God.) Ignatius offers a very simple rule of thumb that can become a helpful spiritual practice in ordering the subject and content of our prayer: as a prelude to the actual prayer time, we should always voice what we "truly want and desire" from God. As we sharpen our intention, focusing it more carefully on what most needs grace, illumination, counsel or aid, we learn a deeper form of spiritual and emotional honesty. I am fortunate to have a friend, a friend whose loving concern for me always draws me to a space of inner simplicity, as he cuts right to the chase and asks, "What do you need?" Remembering that kind of crystallizing

directness is a helpful way to prepare for a space of colloquy.

It is also important to remember that "colloquy" is conversation—a conversation that is mutually self-disclosive, not one-sided. On our part, this involves a willingness to consider and offer up the parts of ourselves that are most difficult, hidden, or unrealized, for it is in these spaces that the relational reality of prayer can be the most beneficial to us. In practical terms, this might take forms in which we consider some of the things that we have noticed about ourselves and never really understood, holding them up for deepening enlightenment. We might seek greater honesty about areas of our lives or our personhood where we have actively or passively avoided contact with God, allowing for greater awareness of where we have resisted depth in relationship with God. These awarenesses ought to provide plenty of material for ongoing colloquy, reflection, and meditation. As we sit with God in silence and loving attentiveness, receiving God with gratitude, hope, and love, we might become aware of how much of ourselves we withhold from God. Considering this

question in meditative silence with a willingness to be shown the possibilities of deeper intimacy with God helps move the practice of colloquy into realms of growth that we can never touch on our own.

As the fundamental backbone of our relationship with God, prayer cannot be a disembodied, disinterested conversation with an abstract entity “somewhere out there.” The more of ourselves that we invest in prayer, the more we begin to have a sense and feel for the One with whom we are in relationship. Indeed, the more dialogical that prayer becomes, the more sensory and more incarnate it becomes. New sensitivities and new forms of communication emerge as we give ourselves over more relationally to God.

For some, this may already be a regular feature of their prayer practice. For others, it may be profoundly new, even quite disconcerting. Even for the most practiced of us, engaging prayer in this colloquial way continually invites and challenges us to new levels of creativity and experience as we explore a more profound, holistic relationship with God.

PRAYER AS TRANSFORMATION

Prayer is transformative. It changes us. The change is observable, palpable, measured not only in terms of the personal growth, maturity, discretion and wisdom that the praying person acquires, but also in her or his loving disposition, concern and desire for the well-being of others. Prayer gives us sensitivities to see what is wrong, unjust, demoralizing, and unworthy of us and of one another. Prayer gives us the courage to denounce those injustices and the wisdom to know how to change the things that need changing, in us and in our world.

As Teresa describes in the Interior Castle, prayer increases our capacity to love. Once we have decided to put God’s will before our own, prayer shows us that God’s will is that we grow toward a partnership with God that gives us life and new possibility. Ultimately, that partnership brings light to the world and asks us to collaborate with God in the work of making the world a place where God would feel at home.

True transformation derives from relationship, and intimacy is a critical part of mature relationship. As Teresa shows us, relationship with God constantly draws us out of the smallness of self, expanding our personhood and creating a habit of flourishing relationality. In other words, prayer is the incubating space for the incarnation of God in the human community; that process cannot happen without considerable self-dedication, yet much of what happens in prayer is not up to us alone. We are part of a process that is worked in us, even as we collaborate in a process of growth in ourselves and in others around us. Growth always involves change. It requires us to continually re-envision ourselves and our world. As Jesus models for us, relationship with God stimulates a prophetic imagination and provides us with new aspirations, for ourselves and for the human community.

PRAYER CHANGES OUR COMMUNITIES

Teresa also makes clear that, in prayer, one cannot choose between the individual and the community. While each individual relationship with God has its own unique contours, our growth into that relationship requires a communal context that many communities may not be able to provide. Recall that Teresa’s own growth in prayer, throughout the decade of her

“...relationship with God constantly draws us out of the smallness of self...”

40s, required her to reform the Carmelite order and create a new communal context intentionally oriented to the growth of the mystical life and the life of *communio* it generates. Thus she suggests that prayer, as a transformative journey, requires change not only in us, but also in our communities. The prayerful community is itself in ongoing transformation.

From Teresa's own experience of prayer and life, we see that prayerful communities must be able to provide support, encouragement, and even loving "correction" of our faults and shortcomings. Our relationships with others in this community must be able to help us sustain motivation and discipline; reject any blindness, complacency or sloth; and stimulate our capacity to love and to choose goodness and personal/interpersonal maturity. Prayer asks us, requires us to prioritize human growth, personally and communally. Communities of prayer, as Teresa envisioned and created them, embody love, value wisdom over piety, and recognize that such wisdom is creative and practical, able to resist and provide graced alternatives to abuse, degradation, violence, and indignity. Prayer empowers us to be "wise as serpents and gentle as doves" and is the avenue for strength in a world that resists the hopeful grace of human tenderness.

Transformation, as a concept or as a practical reality, may seem amorphous or haphazard, but in Teresa's schema there is a very clear progression of steps. We could consider these steps to be developmental milestones, involving the will, the affect, the intellect, and a dedication to transformative practices. Prayer is the constant context and even the energy that moves us through the steps. Without intending to be reductionist in the brief space that remains, I hope that this outline serves as an invitation to engage Teresa's masterful Interior Castle, perhaps with the assistance of *Entering Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle: A Reader's Companion*.

SEVEN STAGES OF TRANSFORMATION

Teresa's transformative process consists of seven stages. The first step is to recognize that we are

more than the world recognizes us to be. Teresa uses the traditional word "soul," which in our post-modern context has lost a great deal of currency, but which still speaks strongly to our capacity, as humans and as persons in constant formation, to transcend limitation, to participate in God's constant creative activity, to be restored to our noble self. There are as many paths to the recovery of our souls as we can imagine; the point of the first stage is simply to recognize that there is a path to something more than who we currently are, and that relationship with the divine, in whom we have our origin, is that path. It is the dignity of ourselves that is recognized as part of the first stage ("I don't find anything comparable to the magnificent beauty of a soul and its marvelous capacity...") as well as our origins in the image of God.⁹

The next two stages refer to what we do in direct response to the recognition of our innate, created dignity. It is not entirely a question of "recovering" that dignity as it is growing into that dignity, although there is much that will have to be discarded if we are to progress. A "fierce moral inventory," to use words from the recovery movement, is in order, and it constitutes much of the second stage, in which our lives are reviewed under the specific criterion of what "better leads to God's deepening life in me and in the world around me."¹⁰

In the second stage, we become painfully aware of how often we have fallen short of our potential as human beings, and we derive a greater appetite to become the person we are capable of becoming. In the third stage we devote our discipline and our will toward the growth in virtue that leads to better and wiser life choices. These first three stages constitute the "moral" stages of growth and make the next four "mystical" stages of growth possible.

We cross the threshold of the moral and mystical stages by choosing toward a more active partnership with God. In this move we relinquish

⁹ Ibid., I:1:3:

¹⁰ See *Spiritual Exercises*, par. 23.

our “autonomous” identities and choose toward a partnered, “theonomous” identity, in which we allow ourselves to know and be known through our relationship with God. In my experience this is not entirely a “surrender,” although that word is often used. Instead, it is an active partnership that paradoxically we ourselves cannot actuate by ourselves.

Teresa’s language, in the fifth dwelling places of the Interior Castle, speaks of this tension, as she encourages us to be “brave in asking God to give us God’s favor... show us the way and give us the strength to dig until it finds the hidden treasure... that is within us.”¹¹ Although there is “no way to learn of speaking of such things, neither is the intellect capable of understanding them, nor do comparisons serve much in explaining them,”¹² Teresa presses on in her attempts:

See here, what we can do through the help of God: God Godself becomes our dwelling place, one that we build through this prayer of union. It seems I’m saying that we can build up God and take God away since I say that God is the dwelling place and we can build it in order to place ourselves in it. And, indeed, we can! Not that we can take God away or build God up, but we can take away from ourselves and build up, as do these little silkworms. For we will not have finished doing all that we can in this work when, to the little we do, which is nothing, God will unite Godself, with all God’s greatness, and give the soul such high value that God Godself will become the reward of this work.¹³

Here Teresa uses the image of the caterpillar weaving a cocoon and entering into it in order to emerge as a moth, indicative of the new life made possible by its more integrated union with God. As prayer becomes more substantive, intimate and infused, it becomes the very material, the intertwined fibers that support a new identity, in

and with God. The rest of Teresa’s Interior Castle describes the ways that God’s love makes that union something that can be realized in this life.

Rather than thinking of the goal of mystical prayer as “mystical marriage,” which could make union seem ethereal, strictly spiritual and perhaps oriented to withdrawal from the world, it seems more fruitful to speak of prayer becoming life, a living partnership with God. Without in any way wanting to diminish the spousal language that is so important in Teresa’s work, I think that it is equally important for us to understand that all of us, ultimately, are called to move toward such a functional partnership.

PRAYER BECOMES LIFE

As Teresa teaches, consummation of our partnership with God is a graced way of living that allows us to share, with God, in the continuing incarnation of God in the spaces that we inhabit. By the seventh stage of Teresa’s schema, we are graced to live in the constant consciousness of the Trinity, drawn into the living outpourings of love that the Trinity constantly expresses.¹⁴

Ultimately prayer is life. As our prayer becomes our life and our life becomes a long, sustained prayer, prayer is the trustworthy relational context in which we grow into our identity as God’s beloved and become ourselves. Prayer is, at once, the invitation, the strength and the

14 Teresa’s seven dwelling places are actually Trinitarian in orientation. As I have noted in *Entering Teresa of Avila’s Interior Castle: A Reader’s Companion*, although we anticipate a kind of spousal union with God that makes us think of two partners becoming one, the union with Christ that deepens and intensifies in the prayer life of the sixth stage becomes a kind of relational fecundity in the seventh stage. Rather than speaking of Christ as the bridegroom, as so many other mystical authors do, Teresa describes the consummation of union as an invitation into the life of the Trinity. See discussion in *Entering Teresa of Avila’s Interior Castle: A Reader’s Companion*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), pp. 104-10.

11 *Interior Castle*, V:1:2.

12 *Ibid.*, V:1:1.

13 *Ibid.*, V:2:5.

challenge to become ourselves, even as it forms the bridge into the communion that, together, we are called to embody.

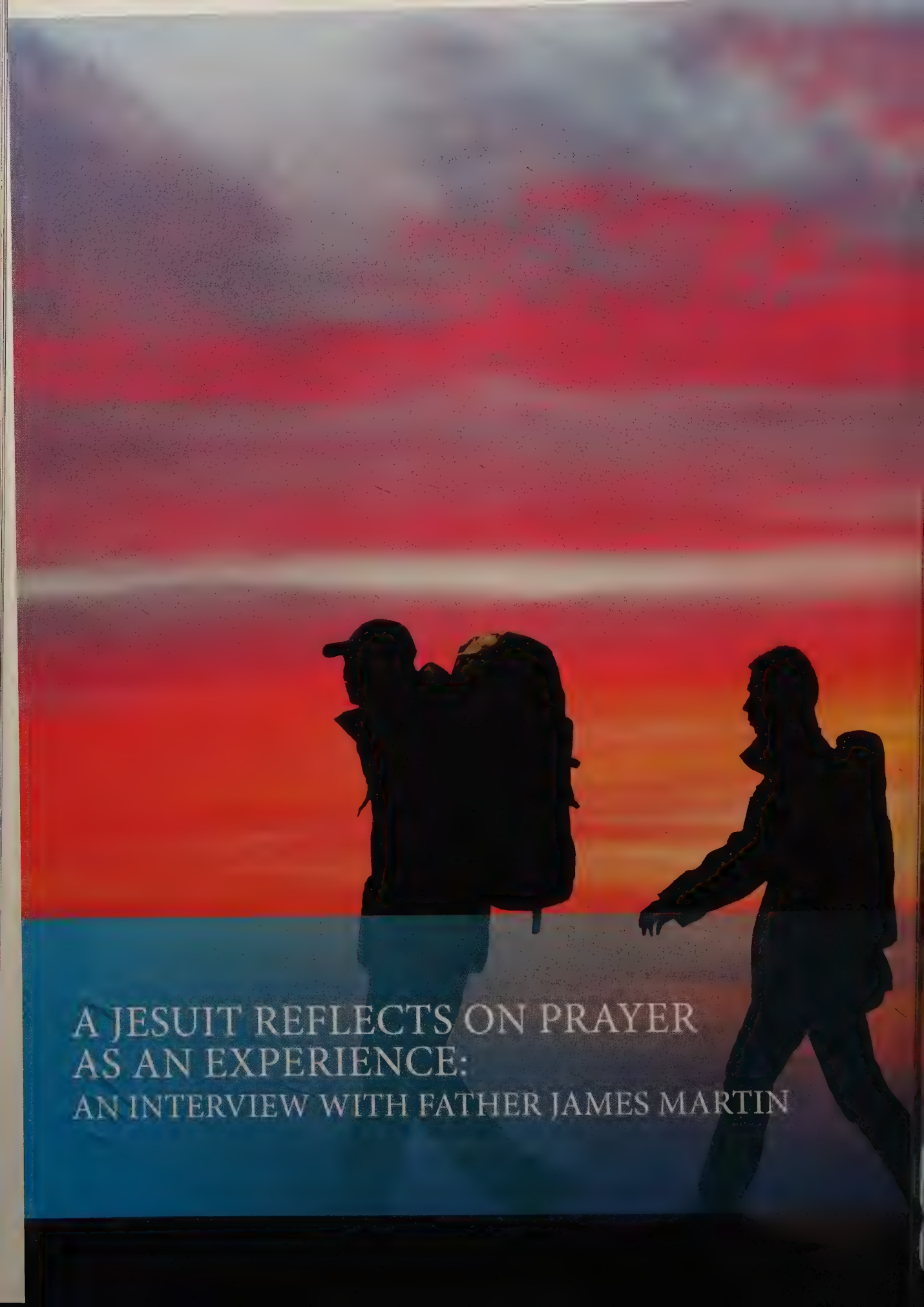
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Dr. Ahlgren explains that for Teresa of Avila, the goal is that prayer should become our life itself; our partnership with God becomes a graced way of living. Do I have a sense of that happening in my life or is prayer still a “bracketed” aspect of my life and activities?
2. How might I think of prayer as “partnership” with God and others and not just my isolated effort?
3. Dr. Ahlgren suggests sometimes the most serious issue for most of us in prayer is what we “withhold” from God. What might I be refusing to bring to the healing light of grace?
4. The article poetically said that the Incarnation continues to happen in the space of our lives when we allow God space to incubate. Do I give God space to rest within my heart? Do I want to rest with all others in the “interior castle” of His love?




ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gillian T.W. Ahlgren is Professor of Theology and Founding Director of the Institute for Spirituality and Social Justice at Xavier University. An internationally-recognized scholar of the Christian mystical tradition, she lectures widely, using the wisdom and practices of the tradition to create renewal experiences for individuals and communities. She is the author of five books, including *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* and *Entering Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle: A Reader's Companion*. Her most recent work, *Enkindling Love: The Legacy of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross*, was published by Fortress Press as part of their Mapping the Tradition series (2016). Her next book, *The Tenderness of God: Reclaiming Our Humanity*, is due out in January 2017. More information on her work is available at gillianahlgren.com



A JESUIT REFLECTS ON PRAYER
AS AN EXPERIENCE:
AN INTERVIEW WITH FATHER JAMES MARTIN

A vertical photograph on the left side of the page shows a person in silhouette, walking away from the viewer and slightly to the left. They are wearing a jacket and carrying a large backpack. The background is a bright, colorful sunset or sunrise, with a gradient from deep red at the bottom to a lighter orange and yellow at the top. The person's shadow is cast on the ground in front of them.

Msgr. Zenz on behalf of HD team: The mission of this magazine is to explore the inter-relationship between human and spiritual development.

Can you speak to how prayer fosters mind, body, spirit integration; wholeness as well as holiness?

Father Martin: Prayer makes you aware of all three—the mind, the body and the spirit. That is, in our rather hectic world we need time to pause, in the presence of God, to consider each of those aspects of our personality. Our mind, to begin with, is certainly at work during prayer, and it's good to give it a chance to settle down, as far as we are able. The body is often an underappreciated element of prayer, but it is an essential partner in the life of prayer—even though sometimes it can even cause us pain or discomfort. It too needs time to quiet down and be noticed. And of course in prayer and meditation our spirits recognize God in an intimate way. At the Jesuit retreat house in Eastern Point, Gloucester, Mass., on the front of the annual brochures they often put the quote “Deep calls to deep” from Psalm 42. I often think of this as our spirits recognizing God when we pray. The deepest part of ourselves recognizes instinctively God’s depth.

It naturally happens that an awareness of these three aspects of our personality helps us to integrate them. Prayer helps us come, in that way, to be more whole. And by becoming our whole self before God we become holy. If your mind alone ruled you, you become a purely intellectual being detached from your body and your spirit. The same would hold true for being ruled by either just the body or the spirit: we would become a divided self. Holiness consists of a full integration of each of those parts of our personality. And prayer is essential for that integration because it helps you notice, examine, integrate and love each of those aspects of yourself.

HD: There seems to be a potential risk in “praying our experiences” – that is, we could get “stuck” in our own emotional issues (anger, disappointment, joy, confusion).

How does one move beyond the emotional (or rational) into a genuine God-focused contemplation?

Father Martin: That’s a very good point. “Praying our experiences” is essential. You will remember Walter Burghardt’s description of prayer as “a long loving

look at the real.” The “real” can be seen as our lived experiences of God. In other words, our experiences. But that can easily turn into navel-gazing.

At the beginning of the spiritual life, however, I think that some focus on self is essential. If you think about it in the context of the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius Loyola asks us to look at ourselves as “loved sinners.” So some self-knowledge is essential. But I must move beyond that if it is to become a mature spirituality. And I mean not simply turning to God, to see what God has in mind, but also bringing the needs and desires of other people into our prayer in a conscious way. My New Testament professor, Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, once summed up St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans as “Freedom from sin and death and the Law, and freedom for life in the Spirit.” Prayer enables us to be free from certain things, which moves us to freedom for others, and so that movement is never selfish.

HD: Another challenge with “praying our experiences” might be this: how do I ensure that I’m always praying with and for the whole Body of Christ?

Any suggestions?

Father Martin: A simple answer is to read the newspaper every day! When you do, it’s hard to shut out other people’s experiences from your prayer unless you have a completely cold and stony heart. And I don’t think that you can have that if you open yourself up in a sincere way to prayer. God is always softening our stony hearts and making them into “natural hearts,” to quote the Book of Ezekiel. But perhaps one way to ensure that that does not happen is to consciously take time to pray for other people and to pray for the Church each day.

HD: As a good Jesuit, you constantly speak about “finding God in all things.”

Is that the same thing as “praying our experiences?”

Father Martin: That’s another good question. I would say that “finding God in all things,” which is a shorthand summary for Ignatian spirituality, includes “praying our experiences,” but does not end there. For it must move beyond just our own experiences and look at the experiences of other people. So finding God in all things includes meditating on the mystery of God in the world,

not simply in our own world. It’s an invitation to experience God in every moment of our day, but also in the events of the world and the events of other people. And so it is a very open spirituality, not closed in on itself at all. It moves us outwards.

HD: It has been said that one should pray with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. While I realize the metaphor may be dated, the point still seems relevant:

How do we pray with the burdens of the world?

Father Martin: Well, that’s funny since that was the quote that I was thinking about when I answered the last question. Praying about the burdens of the world can be difficult for some people. We can become overwhelmed with tragedies, murders, natural disasters, and of course the grinding poverty and inequalities that plague billions of people in the world. In response to that, I would offer two perspectives. First, it is important to remember that our prayer is not only a begging of God for help in the world, but also something that should transform our hearts. When we pray and think about, say, Jesus’s response to the poor, we are naturally moved to pity and moved to action. Moved to work with the poor, be with the poor and advocate for the poor. And even if we don’t feel it emotionally we recognize the claim that it has on us in an intellectual sense.

When experiencing the despair that can sometimes accompany awareness of the ills of the world, we must remember the Resurrection. Like Jesus’ disciples on Good Friday or Holy Saturday, we might not see it but God’s light and life are already dawning. As the Scriptures proclaim again and again, “nothing is impossible for God.”

HD: When we came up with the theme – “praying our experiences,” at one level we were thinking of ministerial experiences – i.e. thanking God for “using” us in His service. At other times I might feel “burned out,” underappreciated, even a failure. You have written many powerful articles on this general theme with poignant personal examples.

Would you let us “eavesdrop” on your own ministerially – based prayer?

Father Martin: Yes of course. My own prayer, more often than not, focuses on ways that God is inviting me to be more free. That is, specifically in my



relationships with family, friends, coworkers, brother Jesuits, in general that I might respond more readily to whatever God asks of me. But in terms of my ministry, I have a rather unique one—writing books and working as an editor at *America Magazine*. Oftentimes, then, I pray about what I’m writing about or thinking of writing about—asking God if this is what I’m meant to be writing, meant to be saying. Just the other day I asked Jesus in my prayer if it was right to speak out on a controversial matter, in a challenging but mild way, and I heard him say, “If not you, who?” So that gave me some confidence.

In terms of burnout, and not feeling appreciated, even feeling a failure, that’s a hard thing for anyone. There are times where I have felt all those emotions. And in those moments, for me, remembering that Jesus probably felt all, or most of, those things at various points in his earthly life is a huge help. And really, I go back to the Resurrection all the time. Even though I may feel burned out, underappreciated, or having failed, I know that God has something new in store. And I know, at a more basic level, God is with me. Sometimes simply spending time in prayer is helpful for the reminder that you are not alone. I like to think of it as Jesus and me in the boat, and we’re both rowing in the same direction.

HD: “Experiences” often involve things that startle us and call us beyond our comfort zone, “epiphanies” as it were: the majestic beauty of nature, the challenging foods, smells and customs of traveling in

other parts of the world, stories of grace or tragedy, movies that haunt us.

Would you say it is helpful to pray with art, in the midst of nature or with literature?

Father Martin: Yes, all of those things can be helpful. Of course, as most readers of the magazine know, not everything appeals to every person. I have a close Jesuit friend who more or less hates being out in nature. And I’m reminded of the old Fran Lebowitz quote that nature is something you pass through to get from your hotel to a cab. But for me nature is itself transporting. My life in New York allows me very few opportunities to really appreciate nature. And perhaps some of that is my fault: though Central Park is close I don’t have much time to wander around it. So those times when I see natural beauty, sometimes it overwhelms me. And that leads me to God.

So those kinds of epiphanies happen fairly frequently when I’m in nature. But also, as you say, moving past our comfort zone to “liminal” places, where we are forced to see things in a way, can help us experience God in a new way.

HD: Any good examples from your own experiences? (I think of your sharing of insights from Holy Land pilgrimages in your novel *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*).

Father Martin: Recently I was on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Now, any trip to the Holy Land

is bound to be meaningful. But this time was especially meaningful. It was the third time I had been there. The first time was to do research for a book I was writing on Jesus, the second visit was the first group pilgrimage sponsored by America Media, and this third time was a repeat of the group pilgrimage. What surprised me most, and consoled me, was finding myself, on this third trip, much more relaxed and, consequently, utterly able to enter into the experiences of the other pilgrims. Now, as a Jesuit, and someone who gives retreats, and conferences and so on, I'm always trying to be open to enter into another person's experience, but perhaps because of the workings of grace, perhaps because I was more relaxed about the pilgrimage by this point, I found myself deeply present with the other pilgrims. It was a wonderful experience of ministry. So an experience I thought that I knew (being on pilgrimage with another group) turned out to be quite different and quite profound. It was an example, once again, of the God of Surprises, who is particularly surprising in new places.

HD: Many of our readers deal with addictions and recovery – their own personal challenges or accompanying a friend or client.

What might “praying our experience” mean for an addictive personality?

Father Martin: Well, I might hesitate to answer since I'm not a psychologist or a healthcare professional. But I think it's important for the addict not simply to pray about his or her addictions, and the kinds of things that lead him or her into desiring whatever substance or behavior that is the root of the addiction, but also the moments of grace. As most of us do, I sometimes feel addicted to various things, and it can be helpful to see ourselves more on a trajectory, so that we don't get to despairing or even shamed by our past. Instead of saying, “I'm not where I want to be,” you can say, “Well, I'm on the right trajectory. I'm going in the right direction.” In this way you can see the workings of grace happening within you gradually, and you can see God at work over time. There's a wonderful line in Gerard Manley Hopkins poem “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” where he asks God, (and I'm paraphrasing) to change me all at once like St. Paul or gradually like St. Augustine. I think more of us are changed gradually, like Augustine.

HD: How might the addict move from an urgent longing and emptiness, looking to be filled to the point of consecrating the emptiness, as a gift back to God?

Father Martin: That's another answer that I might reserve for a psychologist. But I might say that the emptiness that an addict feels, can, as St. Augustine said, only be filled with God. “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, Lord,” as he wrote in *The Confessions*. But even if you're not a fan of Augustine, there is a way that you can understand that emptiness as both a powerlessness and a reminder of God's presence in your life, of your need for God. I've struggled with this in my own spiritual life. The desire to want to “fix” a part of your life immediately, and the need to admit your own powerlessness, as Alcoholics Anonymous says, is always going to be a tension within you. So some power and some powerlessness.

HD: Some of our readers are priests or pastoral ministers with the joyful opportunity of leading a congregation in public prayer, much of which is often formulaic and “pre-scripted.”

How can a celebrant or prayer-leader make the prayer “fresh” for himself/herself as well as for those with whom and for whom he/she prays?

Father Martin: That is important to think about whether you're a priest, a pastoral minister, a layperson participating in worship services, or even someone who does something ritualistic in one's daily life. For me, it is being open to the surprising ways that the same ritual with the same words can take on new meanings, thanks to the workings of grace. So, for example, when I am celebrating Mass or reading or preaching on a Gospel I've read hundreds of times, suddenly a new word or phrase or gesture jumps out and takes on a deep meaning. Here I know God is trying to touch me. So one learns to always be open to any opportunity like that. Thus, the ritual is always fresh.

HD: Can we “create” an experience of “praying our experience?”

Father Martin: Well, there are many experiences already that have been created to help us pray our experiences: for example, the prayer popularized

by St. Ignatius Loyola called the “examination of conscience,” or the “examen.” And I think the very first article I read about that prayer was in Human Development! And I do think that praying our experiences must involve a conscious reflection or an inventorying of what has gone before. There should be at least the barest of structure.

HD: As you know, a principle of literature is the paradox that what is most personal and unique is also that which is most universal, articulating my own deepest darkness or dream. I am “in sync” with the deepest desires and hopes of every human being.

How can “praying our own experience” help us connect with the rest of humanity?

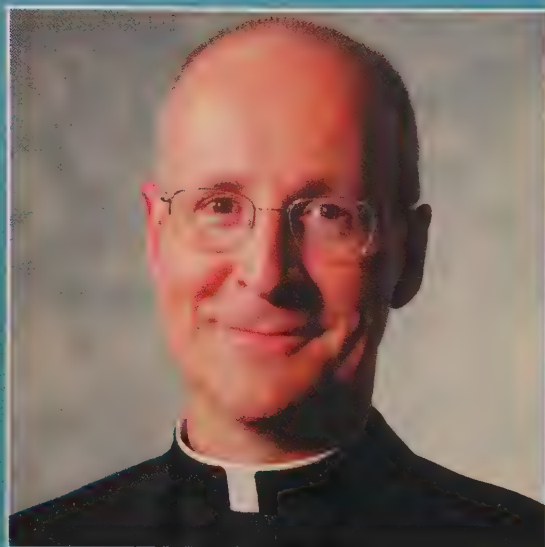
Father Martin: What a wonderful question! As we grow older, we realize that what we thought of as our own private struggles, private pains that no one could understand, are often shared by other people. I remember as a young adult, when my parents were going through some marital difficulties, how many people my own age told me that they were in a similar situation. That is, their own parents were separated or divorced. And here I was thinking that this was something that was unique just to me. Bringing those struggles before God in prayer means that you will have a sense of reverence about them, which means you are more likely to reverence them in others.

HD: The Jewish mystic, Etty Hillesum stated, “My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You, O my God.” —

What advice would you give someone who wanted to make that statement a reality in his or her own life?

Father Martin: That’s a lifelong quest is it not? It is very much like St. Paul’s exhortation to “pray always.” But what a wonderful thing to imagine oneself in a constant dialogue with God. The most helpful advice I could offer is to remember that God is already having a conversation within you. In fact, you are the words spoken by God.

So the dialogue was already begun, by God. All you have to do is listen and speak. And that speaking is happening not only in your time of prayer but in your very life itself. Pray the experience and make the experience a prayer!



ABOUT JAMES MARTIN, SJ

James Martin, SJ, is a Jesuit priest, editor at large of *America* magazine and author of many books, including the New York Times bestsellers *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* and *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*. Father Martin is also a frequent commentator in the national and international media on topics of religion and spirituality, and has an active ministry on social media. He is also a trained spiritual director and frequently offers retreats and workshops around the country. He lives in a Jesuit community in New York City.



PRAYING OUR HEART OUT

Msgr John Zenz

As a way to concretize the various essays of this issue on "Praying our Experience," I offer the following as "prayer starters" for dealing with various emotions or circumstances in our lives. Please remember that in the process of the prayerful reflection and contemplation, the goal is always to get beyond oneself and the particular emotion or challenge at hand, learning to see it within the context of God's providential care for us all. Ideally

we move from our own tears to joining the Lord in His weeping for the suffering of the world. Hopefully we move from personal preoccupations to a deeper ability to marvel at the mystery of God who is completely selfless. As in all prayer, we want to reach the point of humble adoration. As the whole issue has explained, we cannot reach the contemplative moment in a way that is integrated and wholesome unless we are able to be emptied of ourselves. So

as we begin our prayer, we need to face the reality of the joy or struggle, boredom or pain that brings us to prayer. As the late Walter Burghardt wrote years ago, “contemplation is a long, loving look at the real.” I have emphasized the word “real” because that is the challenge for most of us: to pray from the deeper “truth” of who we are at any given moment – a sinner looking for forgiveness, a selfish person trying to let go of jealousy, a good person who has strong sexual attractions, a lonely person who feels forgotten etc. etc.

PRAYING WITH GRATITUDE AFTER A POSITIVE MINISTERIAL EXPERIENCE

“Lord, I come before you filled with joy at knowing how you have used me and touched people’s hearts. Thank you for letting me see it in their faces, in their smiles and even in their tears. I want to enter into the mind and heart of Jesus who must have felt this same way but with even greater intensity. As He consecrated to you all those He met through His touch and His prayer, to the extent possible, please move these good people to a new and deeper communion with you. Help me not to be selfish but to let go of this moment of success. Thank you for the people who have made me who I am – family and teachers, friends and co-workers and the people I have met today! Draw us all into the communion of your holiness with all the Saints.”

FACING THE TRUTH OF MY OWN ADDICTIONS

“Heavenly Father, you know how you have made me – beautiful and capable with so many gifts. You have surrounded me with blessings and resources. You know that I am never satisfied. I always want more – more food and drink, more time and friends, more clothes and opportunities to travel. The list goes on; I need not explain to you, O Lord. I want to stop my addiction but I feel helpless. I am not sure I can live without all the crutches I use to get through the day. I feel saddest, Lord, for the times and ways I even use

people for my own comfort and reassurance. Help me to contemplate on the mystery of Your Son and to enter into His experience of utter emptiness and complete detachment. May the words of St. Paul’s hymn in Philippians trigger in me a peace that comes precisely in emptiness. Let me consecrate to you and keep empty that emptiness and restlessness I keep trying to fill.”

PRAYING THROUGH ANGER

“Lord I did it again. I exploded unnecessarily. I spoke harshly. I was judgmental when it was not necessary. I feel embarrassed and ashamed. Help me to move out of my own self-absorption and recognize the pain that I have caused others this very day. I pray for those whom I hurt this day. I know from years of experience, Lord, that anger is not really caused by the other but is something unsettled in me. You know with what I am dealing inside – a sense of inadequacy, a fear of no longer being in control, a sense of disappointment at not being appreciated and recognized by my superiors and even by the people that I serve. You know the jealousy that so quickly rises in my mind and heart when I see the success of others. Lord, teach me the gift of gratitude for what I have and that I do not have to be in control and never will be. Help me to be at peace with who I am: a child in your arms.”

PRAYER IN A TIME OF LUST

“You know my wandering eyes Lord and you know my deep desire to be touched and held, embraced and truly wanted. I know I say it is my loneliness that drives me to these thoughts and imaginations and crazy desires. But ultimately, I am surrounded by so much love that I do not even know how to begin to accept. I so often feel your embrace but ask instead for something more tangible, immediate and physical. Lord, I praise you for the beauty of so many people you have created; help me not to be selfish about their beauty. Show me how to give that beauty back to you by words of praise and gratitude.

Help me to see your beauty in the mirror and in every single person that I meet, especially those who do not immediately seem to radiate with attractive qualities. Help me to envision how you look at me with your agape love.”

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

“Lord I know my sins and most of them I can trace to a single consistent issue: I do not love you and trust you because I do not really accept myself as I am and as you see me. I do not believe that I am really lovable and work so hard to earn the admiration of others. Lord I ask for the grace to surrender to the power of love, to accept that I am good because I am yours, to believe that you have created only that which is good and beautiful. Strengthen my trust and confidence – not in myself or others but in you!”

PRAYING THE PAIN OF ANOTHER

“Loving Lord, I wish I had the power to take away the pain of my friend, the struggle of my parishioner. All I could do was listen. I had no solutions. I feel helpless. I know she is suffering intensely – all alone physically and psychologically. But I cannot solve so many of these problems in my family or in our world. I hand them to you Lord and I pray that you may help me to remember that you yourself chose the way of apparent helplessness but thereby transformed the pain from within. Let the mystery of Jesus and the power of His Resurrection begin to break through the darkness of this moment. In whatever way, Lord, may I accept and absorb the pain and uncertainty on her behalf. I know you are doing that right now for all of us!”

Amen.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ordained July 1, 1978 for the Archdiocese of Detroit, Msgr. John Zenz received a Doctorate in Spirituality from the Gregorian University in Rome in 1984. He served in various capacities in the Archdiocese including Moderator of the Curia, Vicar General and Episcopal Vicar for one of the four Regions of the Archdiocese. Since 2008 he has been pastor of Holy Name Parish, Birmingham. He became Executive Editor of Human Development Magazine in May 2015.



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ADDICTION AND REDEMPTION: THE WAY OUT

Jeff Jay



My addiction had taken me down to the point that I was sleeping under bushes in a city park. At twenty-six years of age, I had a bleeding ulcer, a bleeding colon and transient neuropathy of the legs. But I still didn't think I had an alcohol or drug problem—I just thought I had a little cash-flow problem, and if I could scrounge up twenty bucks, I would be just fine.

The consequences of my behavior had been mounting up for years. I went from being a national merit scholar to a serial college dropout. I was chosen for a great job as a writer in Chicago, but lost the position in six months because of my alcoholism. I crashed cars, ruined good relationships, and alienated friends and family. Even my cocaine dealer told me I had a drinking problem. I was astonished. At the same time, I could not make sense of my actions as I bounced from city to city, year after year.

Looking back on my addiction, after decades of stable recovery, I know I was sustained in some mysterious way by the prayers of others, especially my parents. At that time, prayer was impossible for me, as it is for many addicted individuals. Without the active intercession of my parents, and ultimately their intervention, I would not have survived.

Like most alcoholics and drug addicts, I had a distorted view of my drug use. Have you ever tried to confront an alcoholic on his drinking problem? The tables will turn very quickly and you will find that you are the problem, and if you would only stop nagging, he might not drink so much. For an addict, the drug is the “solution;” it cannot possibly be the problem. That is why communication with an active addict is all but impossible. It is also one of the main reasons addicts are resistant to change.

When the end came for me, it was gruesome. I had traveled to San Francisco one last time, hoping for a fresh start, but I was quickly on the skids. I had just enough money for a flop house room in North Beach, a little food, and a lot of alcohol. An old girlfriend came to see me at ten in the morning as I sat in the grass of Washington Square Park, drinking my breakfast. She looked beautiful and hip, and talked earnestly about my addiction problem. Needless to say, she made no progress as she tried to encourage me to do something, anything, but drink myself to death. I remember her sadness and frustration in trying to reach me through the bulwark of my denial.

Somehow I heard through the grapevine that Rickie, an old high school friend of mine, had committed suicide. He'd done it in a quiet and fastidious way: taking a handful of Valium and then pulling a large plastic trash bag over his head and cinching it around his neck with heavy-duty rubber bands. He laid down on his bed, passed out, and eventually suffocated. No muss, no fuss.

So deep was my emotional paralysis, so craven my thinking, that when I heard about Rickie's suicide, my immediate reaction was “far out,” and I silently resolved to do the same. It would be easy enough to accomplish, and even seemed like the right thing to do, as my life was obviously over. I could not even hold a busboy job anymore; I could not even stay on my feet for a full shift. I could not survive without constant doses of alcohol. I was in the final stage of the illness, so I would drink for a few hours, sleep for a few hours, and then wake up and drink again.

I felt like I was drowning in a sea of despair, without the least flicker of faith. In the absence of hope, death

seemed like a good idea, even a merciful option. I regretted the waste of my life, but saw no way to save it. I was as incapable of prayer as I was any other relationship. My world revolved around the addiction.

I had tried to detox myself once a couple years before, the last time I had been in San Francisco. I'd gotten myself into a god-awful little hole of a room above a strip joint on Broadway, and I planned to wait out the demons. I lay in the bed with torn sheets and blankets, sweating and shaking and hearing voices.

My room had a window that looked out on an air shaft, and I watched it go dark at night and brighten in the morning—and so I counted the hours of my agony. After two days and two nights of muscle spasms, diarrhea, and fitful bouts of non-sleep, I was getting dehydrated, so I walked down the dirty stairwell to the street like a zombie. It must have been 3 a.m., but there was a little all-night store a few doors down where I could buy some orange juice. The shocker came when I saw a stack of the next day's newspapers sitting by the cash register. I could not believe it.

What the newspaper was telling me, by its awful, incomprehensible date, was that two days had not passed, only a part of a day. I had hallucinated the passing of time, and I was at the beginning of the detox, not the end. It was too much for me, and I returned the juice to the cooler and bought two quarts of beer instead. There was no escape and I never tried again.

I did not know anything about addiction or recovery in those days. I figured I could probably stop drinking if I checked into a church mission of some sort and followed the dictums of some priest for the next couple years, but I was a card-carrying atheist in those days and had been a philosophy major in college, so I could argue my points with vigor and depth. When I was growing up, I had been an altar boy and had tried to believe as my father had, but all that was gone, and I embraced the intellectual fashions of the day. They nearly killed me.



A TURNING POINT

My plan for suicide was interrupted by a series of unlikely events that can fairly be called miraculous. To abbreviate the long story: I was discovered wandering the streets in a blackout by a vacationing family friend from Michigan. The friend realized I was in grave danger, determined the location of the flop house I had landed in, and alerted my parents. They in turn went into action, and the next day they reached me by phone (in an era before cell phones) and in spite of the fact that I had no phone in my room. Once they got me on the line, I made some excuse, hung up the phone and headed for the liquor store.

Ten minutes later, I was sitting in the grass of Washington Square Park with a small bottle of wine to ward off my despair. It appeared I could not even commit suicide properly. I was a failure at everything. Then it occurred to me that my parents just might call the police, so I called them back, to buy a little more time. I was still planning on ending it all.

A kiosk of pay phones stood in the corner of the park, and I placed a collect call back to Michigan. It was an unusually sunny day in North Beach, and I admired the solidity of Saints Peter and Paul Church as I spoke to my parents. Did something begin to resonate—an echo of my previous faith? My parents were unusually kind, and I began to soften.

“Jeff, how are you doing?” asked my father.

I was physically ill all the time, and my mind was confused. But somehow the blue skies, the songbirds, and the church spires caused me to say something I’d never even considered: “I think I need to go into a hospital.”

Where this outlandish idea came from, I don’t know. The idea of rehab was all but unknown in 1981; but the next thing I knew there was a taxicab, a ride to the airport, a plane ride to Detroit, a shaky night at home, and a car ride to Hurley Hospital in Flint, Michigan, early the next morning. The first twenty-four hours in the detox ward were rough, though the medication helped. In the middle of the night, if I am not mistaken, the ancient alcoholic in the bed next to



mine went through his last agonies and passed away, despite the frantic ministrations of the staff. Once they wheeled his lifeless body away, I was alone and I was afraid.

The next day, I had a visit from the head doctor on the ward, Dr. William Keating, who had decades of experience in alcohol and drug treatment. I was a twenty-six year old kid sitting on the side of the bed, shaking and sweating and feeling terrible. I was wearing a blue hospital gown that tied up in the back ineffectively. Dr. Keating strode into the room with authority—a big, powerful black man with a white coat, a stethoscope, and a clipboard. It was like God himself coming in to take charge. He pulled up a chair and got right up in my face and called out like he was trying to wake the dead. And maybe he did.

“Boy!” he said.

I almost jumped out of my skin.

“Boy,” he said, “you’ve got a disease. You are not responsible for what you have done.”

Great, I said to myself.

“But you are responsible for what you do now.”

Shit, I said to myself.

“Your disease is incurable,” he said. “The most we are going to be able to do is put it in remission. We are going to give you a program to follow: Twelve Steps. You follow that program and the disease will stay in remission. You stop following that program and the disease is going to kick you in the ass again.”

Then he stood up and walked out.

I did not know what he was talking about. I did not know anything about alcoholism, Twelve Steps or anything else, but I was suddenly alert in the daze of detox, and I tried to ponder his statements. As the hours and days went by, Dr. Keating’s brief prognosis and prescription echoed in my mind, like operating instructions for a new life.

I spent ten days in the hospital before I was stable enough to transfer to a residential treatment center. My physical health was returning, but my thinking was cloudy, and my emotions were running on an erratic rollercoaster. A lot happened in the next three weeks, but as I was getting ready for discharge, I had a terrible realization: I was going to drink again. At

the time, I was walking the grounds of the facility, and trying to figure out my next move. I did not want to drink, I knew it was a terrible idea, but I knew I would drink again, despite my best efforts. I just could not stop.

In the next moment, I also realized that I would not survive another bout of cross-country alcoholism. I'd landed in too many crazy places, I'd gotten too sick, and I just wasn't going to survive. I became possessed by a terrible certainty: "I'm going to drink again, and I'm going to die."

I tried to run from the facts, but my attempts to rationalize were as flimsy and transparent as the lies I told to cover my addiction. I knew what was going to happen, and this time there would be no miracle intervention. I had had my chance, and I was all but certain to blow it.

REACHING A STEP TWO: FALLING TO MY KNEES

My intellectual pride still would not allow any kind of prayer or faith. I could accept Step One—that I was powerless over alcohol and that my life had become unmanageable. Any fool could see that. But I resisted Step Two, and rejected the idea of God altogether. I just could not believe that a power greater than myself was going to restore me to sanity. Consequently, the remaining steps were impossible. I was a sober alcoholic without a program of recovery. I was doomed.

This anguish lasted for hours, with the unavoidable truth always in my head: "I am going to drink again and I am going to die." I was frantic to break its grasp and hopeless at the same time. The afternoon turned into evening, and the evening turned into night, and the night turned into the dead of night. I paced my small room at the treatment center, sat in the desk chair, and stared at the darkened window that reflected my image back at me. I didn't believe in hell, but I was in it, burning in my own helplessness and fear. The hours and minutes glowed on the face of my clock radio like an inscrutable countdown.

People in recovery talk about desperation as a gift, because it strips away the intellect and lays the choices bare. Desperation brings clarity to the mind by tearing away the comforts of arrogance and pride. It rips away the shield of self-pity and depression, and calls for a decision. Sink or swim! The gift of desperation is the last chance for life. It is the gift of grace.

This agony made me do something I'd never done before, something I never would've done under any other circumstances. And out of this simple action came all my recovery. At about two o'clock in the morning, I got down on my knees in the middle of the room. I was beyond hope, beyond words, beyond anything I'd ever known.

I knelt down on the carpet, held my hands in prayer, and cried out to the One I did not believe in.

"God, help me," I said.

Then I buried my face in my hands and sank into the darkness and pleaded, "God, help me."

I knelt in the ruins of my life, alone. I closed my eyes against the void, drained of all expectation. Yet within me was the slightest glimmer of hope, like an echo from the past, and in that moment of supreme desolation, I was lifted up and something happened that I can only explain in the way a child might explain it: all of heaven opened up for me.

MEETING CHRIST: IMMERSED IN LOVE

A kind of waterfall seemed to be breaking over me, a waterfall of love. I was kneeling under a great, cleansing waterfall that came in wondrous torrents. It was water made of light, pure and silky. It was alive, too, and personal. It was not a substance, but a living presence, wiser and more intuitive than I could grasp. This presence was greater than the world, yet flowing into the world, and washing over me and filling me with joy. I knew I was in the presence of Christ.

We knew each other as friends know one another, but deeper than that, deeper than I knew my own

thoughts. And this cascade poured over my mind and washed away all my fears and doubts. The joy of meeting was ecstatic and spacious. My fear of death, my inability to control myself, my nameless anxieties and torments were all obliterated. And I knew I could stay sober. I was in a rapture, completely immersed in the heart of God and swept into eternity.

I could also see that God had no more in common with our religions than the ocean has with a small bay. The ocean may fill the bay, and the bay may hold some fraction of the ocean, but they are utterly different. Every wondrous thing attributed to God is true, but in this life we are only at the edge of the bay and we cannot see the waters beyond. For a few moments though, I was alive in the ocean, and the Divine exploded over me like an enormous surf, and I rode the wave.

Under this endless cascade of love, still on my knees, but with my arms outstretched and looking up with wonder, I was transformed. My mind was unshackled and released into a greater realm. Not only did I know I could stay sober, I knew that all my malignant thoughts were illusions, and these illusions only lived on the power I gave them. All my demons were flushed downstream like motes of dust, entirely insignificant, and I was immersed in the water of life.

As the rapture wound down, I became overwhelmed and got up from my knees to lie down on the bed. Again and again I said, "Thank you," and knew I was heard. I knew I was always heard.

I was stupefied by the transformative power of what I experienced. It rewired my brain instantaneously and positively, in the same way a traumatic event can rewire the brain negatively. There was no anxiety left in my heart, no doubt in my mind. I was completely free of the obsession to drink and free of the heckling thoughts.

LOVED BECAUSE OF MY ADDICTION!

The Twelve Steps now made sense to me, and once I was discharged I started going to meetings. The most memorable quality of the first people I met in early recovery was their kindness. They listened to what I had to say with tremendous sympathy, and although our stories were all very different, it wasn't too hard to see the similarities. My family loved me in spite of my alcoholism, but these people loved me because of my alcoholism. They were my tribe. Rather than preach, they invited me to accompany them on the journey of recovery, using the simple slogans of the program. "Easy does it," they said. "Keep coming back."

It occurred to me that I was already a pro at the famous "one day at a time" approach. After all, when I was drinking, I did not worry about next week's booze, so I just stopped worrying about next week's sobriety. I focused only on the present. I became a big fan of the Serenity Prayer, too. I could not control people or circumstances, but I could control how I responded to them. "Keep it simple," the older members told me. I certainly was not capable of anything more.

SPIRITUALITY UNLOCKS THE DOOR

I had a life-changing spiritual experience, but it was only a beginning. I learned that most people had a more gradual awakening, usually as a result of working the Twelve Steps. I learned, in fact, that the Steps were a recipe for transformation, based on the experiences of the earliest AA's. Some people likened them to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, and there were obvious parallels to the New Testament, especially the Sermon on the Mount and the Letter of St. James. Other people found similarities to their faith traditions. The point was—and this point was always emphasized—that our recovery was contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition. Believe what you like about God, they

"Under this endless cascade of love, still on my knees, but with my arms outstretched and looking up with wonder, I was transformed."

would say, but do the next right thing. There was never a dichotomy between faith and works; they were inseparable. Some people went to church and some did not, but all looked beyond themselves to something greater—to God, as they understood Him.

I began to see the world differently and to live my life with God. I was still subject to every human weakness and foible, and I was far from living a saintly life, but I never picked up a drink or drug again, and I began to make progress. In my addiction I fancied myself as living a life of unbridled freedom, even as my world became smaller and smaller. In recovery, my choices expanded, even as I committed myself to the structure of the Steps and the meetings. Truth, it seemed, always resided in paradox.

My father died an excruciating death when I was fifteen months sober, though he was only fifty-eight years old. It was a terrible blow to the entire family, but I probably weathered it better than anyone because I had so much support from my friends in recovery. They crowded the funeral home, packed the church, and checked on me continually. God's love flowed through them in a way that would have been impossible if I hadn't been part of the group.

In 1986, after I had been clean and sober five years, I began working at Sacred Heart Rehabilitation Center, a treatment program with locations in Detroit and Memphis, Michigan. Sacred Heart catered mainly to indigent men and women from the city, who began with a thirty-day stay in detox, and then continued with a ninety-day residential program out in the country. I worked at the 90 day program, with a caseload of 9 to 12 men. We had over a hundred patients at Memphis at any one time, and it was a tough crowd.

GETTING BEYOND SELF-ISOLATION

The program was run by a priest from Canada named Fr. Vaughn Quinn. He had gotten sober at the Guest House program for Catholic clergy, and had stayed on in Michigan to work with the poor. I had gotten to know Vaughn from Detroit-area 12 Step meetings, where he was a force of nature. He laughed loudly, swore cheerfully and challenged people to get off their butts and out of their ruts. I remember him driving the point home one night during a talk he was giving to a large crowd.

"The biggest pain that you and I have, that stops us from living, from laughing, from loving, is preoccupation with self. The anatomy of faith is this," he said, "do the action first. Take a risk!"

He challenged addicts to end their isolation, and join the group. Vaughn was always in motion, getting people off the street and into treatment, collaring politicians for funding, and collecting well-heeled donors for support. As he continued his lecture that night, he asked the crowd: "Can other people see the unrepeatable beauty of God's creation in the twinkle of your eye?"

Every day when I drove through the countryside and into the two hundred acre campus at Sacred Heart I would pray, "God, help me be a good instrument of your love in the world today." Beyond the techniques and technicalities of the job, I would continuously ask for guidance. How would I cope with the unpredictability of group therapy? How could I bring my own experience into a didactic lecture? The answers usually came as intuition rather than lightning bolt, in simple terms.

Vaughn left the program shortly after I came on the staff, so I never had a working clinical relationship with him. But his method of walking with people on their journey, while challenging them to develop a larger vision of their lives, still resonates with me.

WALKING THE TWELVE STEPS TOGETHER

In my years as a counselor, I have seen countless people go through a spiritual evolution on their way to achieving long term recovery. They admit their problem without reservation (Step One), they reach outside themselves for a solution to their dilemma (Step Two), and they commit themselves to God—however they may understand God—for guidance (Step Three). Without these key elements, sobriety quickly breaks down. But still more work is required.

Step Four (made a searching and fearless moral inventory) and Step Five (admitted to God, ourselves and another human being the exact nature of our wrongs) are intimidating prospects. On the surface, these Steps seem like a simple preparation for confession, but in practice they go beyond a recitation of wrongs to an examination of underlying

issues. The literature of recovery states that in undertaking these Steps, we must get to the bottom of our resentments, our fears, and our pride.

There are two major goals in the Fourth and Fifth Step process: first, to admit our moral failings in detail and, second, to ferret out the causes of our resentments and self-pity. The first goal usually has a sticking point. In my experience, people often have at least one item they plan to take to their graves, something they have done that is so shameful they cannot speak it out loud. Usually, it is sexual in nature, but it can be any dishonorable act. If this perceived “unforgivable sin” is not brought to light, they will almost always slide back into addiction. “We’re as sick as we are secret,” says the old wisdom. Like any good confession, this unburdening has a substantial reward, and the person immediately feels they have passed an important milestone.

The second goal is more difficult to achieve, and takes more time. Addicts—like all human beings—are susceptible to the double-edged sword of resentment and self-pity. They feel angry and then depressed, anxious and then hopeless. The inventory process is designed to reveal the causes of these malignancies in personal relationships. Though usually mundane in their details, if these problems are not clarified and resolved, they will fester for years. They can also lead to relapse.

Jenny was a prime example. After completing a residential treatment program, she came to see me for follow-up counseling, and wanted to discuss the Fourth Step. I expected her to focus on the shame she felt for subjecting her children and spouse to decades of addiction, but that was not on her list. Instead, she was obsessed with resentments, and in particular a wrongful accusation by an old neighbor who used to be a friend. The accusation had been made more than ten years ago, but Jenny nearly shouted when she spoke about it, and her face flushed red. Jenny’s action had been misconstrued by her neighbor, but she had never sat down with the woman and talked things out.

I suggested to Jenny that the old neighbor could not be expected to read her mind, and that Jenny’s silence probably seemed like an admission of guilt. Jenny’s pride had been wounded and she was self-righteous in her indignation, but she also had a

role in the predicament. This was self-evident to an outside observer, but Jenny was thunderstruck. I suggested she meet with her old neighbor, and clean up her side of the street, so to speak, leaving the results to God. Jenny paused for a moment, realized there was no other reasonable option, and agreed.

Jenny had been locked down by wounded pride and self-pity, but she had enough humility to seek out counseling and accept guidance. Her prayer life went beyond quiet time with God and church attendance. Her prayer life was action oriented. A favorite scripture of the early AAs is from the Letter of St. James: “Faith without works is dead.” In Jenny’s case, she took outward action, attending meetings, getting a sponsor, and seeking additional counseling. She gave God numerous channels to act in her life. Though she was consumed by dozens of petty resentments, it was clear she would ultimately work through them. I knew that Jenny, in the years ahead, would help others, as well.

CONCLUSION: PRAYER AND THE GROUP

I remember a time when I did irreparable harm to someone, at least in my own mind. I celebrated the Sacrament of Penance, but it did not seem sufficient. This problem is commonplace among recovering addicts, and it is a major reason people relapse: they simply cannot forgive themselves. Step Twelve offers a partial solution. It directs us to go out and help others, to carry a message of hope to those who still suffer from addiction, and to practice the principles of recovery in every aspect of our lives. By helping save others, we can save ourselves, and make reparations for an irretrievable past.

“My brothers, if anyone among you should stray from the truth and someone bring him back, he should know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” (James 5:19-20)

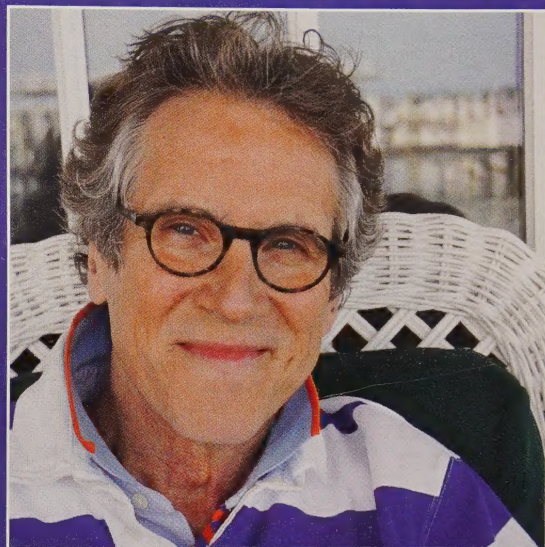
So much of addiction is about being insulated and isolated, refusing to let anyone – even the Lord – into our crusty heart and soul. Freedom comes when we surrender to love, open our hearts, and share our pain.

People in Twelve Step groups have rediscovered a secret that has echoed through the centuries. In

seasons of joy or sorrow, if we stay in the heart of the group, the words of Christ will be fulfilled, and we'll find that "the kingdom of Heaven is among us." (Luke 17:21).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. From reading Jeff's story do you see how conversion happened through prayer and the Twelve Step program and the group support? Even if you are not directly dealing with an addiction, how might those same factors apply for you at this time in your life?
2. Jeff was helping us see and understand how (and why) an addict prays: he met the Lord in the darkness alone but also in the honest sharing of the group. Do you see how we "pray our experience" both individually and in community?
3. How can praying for an addicted person change the situation? How much should we leave to God, and how much should we try an intervention?
4. Do you see similarities between the Ignatian examen and the Fourth and Fifth Steps of AA?
5. Healed and healing: through prayer and conversion and physical care, one can experience healing of addictions of all kinds and degrees of intensity. But an essential and on-going element of the healing also seems to be the willingness to accompany others as they deal with their struggles. How am I experiencing healing as I share the journey of others at this time?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Jay is a certified addiction counselor and intervention professional, with a national private practice, based in Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan. His latest book is "Navigating Grace: a solo voyage of survival and redemption," (Hazelden, 2015) from which parts of this article have been derived. He has served as trustee for several professional and treatment organizations, and is currently advisory board member of Jefferson House, a Capuchin treatment program for indigent men, in Detroit.

ENKINDLING LOVE: THE LEGACY OF TERESA OF AVILA AND JOHN OF THE CROSS

By Gillian T.W. Ahlgren Fortress Press

Reviewed by Bárbara Mujica June 29, 2016

Gillian T.W. Ahlgren, professor of theology at Xavier University, is one of the most highly respected authorities on mysticism in the country. Yet her new book, *Enkindling Love*, is not a scholarly treatise. It is a practical guide to the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) and Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591), two of Spain's most dynamic early modern spiritual reformers, and it is written for laypeople.

In recent years, Teresa and John have captured the public imagination because of their emphasis on interiority, meditation, and one's personal relationship with God. Although Teresa and John were orthodox Catholics, their focus on the personal experience of God rather than the rituals of the Church appeals to many modern spiritual seekers disillusioned with traditional religions.

Teresa appeals especially to feminists, who see her as an independent spirit willing to stand up to Church authorities aiming to silence women. While John has attracted less public attention, he has earned a following among those who see his portrayal of "the dark night of the soul" as a reflection of their own spiritual struggles.

The 16th-century nun Teresa de Jesús, known in the English-speaking world as Teresa of Avila, was the daughter and granddaughter of Jewish merchants who converted to Catholicism due to social and political pressures. After her mother died, Teresa's father placed her in a convent to be educated.

Although she did not intend to become a nun, under the guidance of the novice mistress, she decided to take the habit. She entered the overcrowded, hierarchical, and cliquish Carmelite convent of Incarnation, in Avila, where no time was allotted for mental prayer. Around 1553, Teresa began to experience mystical ecstasies, which some of her spiritual directors attributed to the devil. After a period of interior struggle, Teresa launched a reform movement, founding a new kind of convent where women could lead authentically spiritual lives.

Teresa realized that she would need friars as well as nuns, not only because men would confer gravitas on her undertaking, but also because the nuns would need confessors. At her second foundation in Medina, she met John of the Cross, a young priest who was deeply attracted to the more primitive, authentic kind of Christianity that Teresa was advocating. John soon became her ally and the founder of the first discalced Carmelite friary.

Ahlgren offers in-depth theological analyses of the writings of these two giants of Spanish mysticism, but she does so in a way which allows them to speak for themselves. Her book consists of extracts from Teresa's best structured treatise, *The Interior Castle*, and some of John's most exquisite poems and their prose commentaries. Each segment is preceded by Ahlgren's sensitive, thoughtful exploration of the text and its applications to everyday life. In addition, the author provides a perceptive general introduction and conclusion.

Although Teresa wrote her four treatises at the behest of spiritual directors, Ahlgren argues that she was nevertheless fully engaged in their creation. Writing, for Teresa, was not merely an act of obedience, says Ahlgren. Both she and John "wrote primarily to help others." They wrote "because they were...afire with a love that wanted to burn its way into the hearts of people." They thought that not to write "would be an act of disdain, ingratitude, and utter infidelity to the invitation of their Beloved to share generously the love that they themselves had been graced and privileged to receive."

Ahlgren directs her explanations to believers, but she makes Teresa's words accessible to a broad audience. *The Interior Castle* posits an interior journey into the soul. Imagining the soul to be "like a castle made entirely out of a diamond or very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms," Teresa describes movement through seven concentric circles. The outermost circle is filled with obstacles and dangers (distractions, sinfulness), but as one moves toward the center, the process becomes easier until at last one reaches the innermost circle, where God resides.

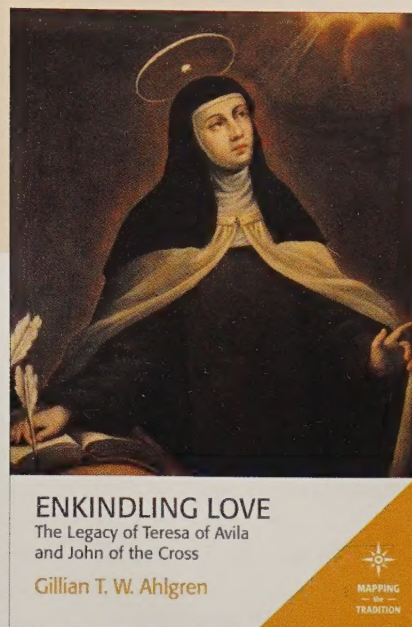
For Ahlgren, the journey begins with self-awareness, consciousness of a “relational reality” between the individual soul, beautiful and full of potential but susceptible to temptation, and the mystery beyond. As we grow in self-knowledge, we are better able to recognize pitfalls and to make wiser life choices.

By the third dwelling place, we are in “a space of greater mindfulness, intentionality and personal integration, characterized by greater moral integrity and a growing consistency and predictability as a human being.” The seventh dwelling place signifies the union between God and the soul; it is a place of complete personal and relational integration, which leads to generosity of spirit and love for others.

John’s poetry reflects a progression of intensity in the love that God and the soul share. Like Teresa’s, John’s writing is most coherent when viewed in Christological terms, yet can be understood in a broader framework. For Ahlgren, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John’s commentary on his poem, *The Dark Night*, describes the “developmental stages” that “revolve around moral behavior and spiritual discipline.” John explores ways in which the descent into the inner darkness open up new dimensions in self-knowledge. By confronting our inner pain, essential to the purgative process through which we recognize our own failings, we grow in spirit and are liberated and transformed.

For Ahlgren, these are not abstractions. She believes that Teresa and John were both “deeply concerned about the kind of person one becomes, through relationship with God.” The process they describe is an invitation to us to be active partners in the work of bringing new life to the human community.” It makes us more alive and creative, more able to effect personal and social transformation.

In addition to teaching and writing, Gillian Ahlgren works with women suffering from domestic violence and addiction. Her belief in the transforming power of God’s love, honed from years of counseling, shines through these pages, imbuing them with humanity and truth.



Review written by Barbara Mujica. Barbara is a professor of Spanish literature at Georgetown University, where she teaches courses on Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. She has written two scholarly books on Teresa, *Teresa de Avila, Lettered Woman* and *Espiritualidad y feminismo: Santa Teresa de Jesús*, as well as scores of articles. Mujica is also a novelist, short-story writer, and essayist. Her latest novel, *I Am Venus*, explores the identity of the model for Velázquez’s *Rokeby Venus*, the painter’s only extant female nude. Her previous fiction includes the international bestseller *Frida*, based on the relationship between Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, and *Sister Teresa*, based on the life of Saint Teresa. This novel was adapted for the stage at the Actors Studio in Los Angeles. Mujica has won numerous prizes for her writing, including first prize in the 2015 Maryland Writers’ Association national fiction competition. This year she also won prizes for her story, “Ox,” and her novel-in-progress, *Lola in Paradise*. Her essays have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and hundreds of other publications.

Prayer on a Sunday Night

from Michel Quoist, *Prayers of Life*, 1963

Tonight, Lord, I am alone.

Little by little the sounds died away in the church,
The people went away,
And I came home,
Alone.

I passed people who were returning from a walk.
I went by the cinema that was disgorging its crowd.
I skirted the café terraces where tired strollers were
trying to prolong the pleasure of a Sunday holiday.
I bumped into youngsters playing football on the
footpath,
Youngsters, Lord,
Other people's youngsters who will never be my
own.

Here I am, Lord,
Alone,
The silence troubles me,
The solitude oppresses me.

Lord, I am 35 years old,
A body made like others,
Ready for work,
A heart meant for love,
But I've given you all.
It's true, of course, that you needed it.
I've given you all, but it's hard, Lord.
It's hard to give one's body; it would like to give itself
to others.
It's hard to love everyone and claim no one.
It's hard to shake a hand and not want to retain it.
It's hard to inspire affection, to give it to you.
It's hard to be nothing to oneself in order to be
everything to others.

It's hard to be like others, among others,
and to be of them.

It's hard always to give without trying to receive.
It's hard to seek out others and to be unsought
oneself.

It's hard to suffer from the sins of others, and yet
be obliged to hear and bear them.

It's hard to hold secrets,
and to be unable to share them.

It's hard to carry others and never, even for a
moment, be carried.

It's hard to sustain the feeble and never be able to
lean on one who is strong.

It's hard to be alone.

Alone before everyone.

Alone before the world.

Alone before suffering

Death,

Sin.

Son, you are not alone,

I am with you,

I am you.

For I needed another human vehicle to continue
my Incarnation
and my Redemption.

Out of all eternity, I chose you,

I need you.

I need your hands to continue to bless,

I need your lips to continue to speak,

I need your body to continue to suffer,

I need your heart to continue to love,

I need you to continue to save,

Stay with me, son.